スレイヤーズすぺしゃる❽

恐るべき未来

神坂 一

イラスト あらいずみるい

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 8

The Terrifying Future

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(March 2026)

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tenchimuyotranslationblog.blogspot.com

Editor's note: This volume features an important extended afterword that details plot details not includable in the main series.

The Guardsman

"Warehouse guard dutyyyyyyyyyy!?"

At his words, I let out a cry of pure dissatisfaction from the bottom of my heart.

"Yes. Warehouse guard duty."

Without paying my protest any mind, he—Mr. Roden—said it quite bluntly.

He was the top merchant in this town—no, this entire region—a stout middle-aged man in his forties.

When I was approached by his butler at a local eatery and told there was 'work available,' I had come running with my heart racing, imagining some kind of lucrative, exciting deal—

I never dreamed it would be such a tame job as guarding a warehouse...

"Of course, when I say guarding a warehouse, I don't mean I simply want you to stand watch, nor am I asking you to take a permanent job as a security guard. I already employ ordinary guards for that. What I want you to do is catch the thieves who have been dropping by quite frequently lately."

"I see... so that's how it is."

Finally, I understood the situation.

"It started about two months ago... our warehouse began getting hit by thieves on a regular basis. Naturally, we have guards on site, but..."

SLAM!

Interrupting Mr. Roden, the door to the room swung wide open.

Standing there was a handsome young man around twenty years old.

However, his face was currently twisted with such rage that his good looks were completely wasted.

"What is the meaning of this, Uncle!?"

He strode up to Mr. Roden, then pointed a finger sharply right at me!

"Hiring *this* to be a guard!?"

...T-this...?

"Calm down, Claude."

Mr. Roden spoke in a bitter tone to the young man's fierce outburst.

"How am I supposed to stay calm!? Even though I'm here as the Head of Security, you go and hire some suspicious drifter like this! It makes it look like I'm incompetent! I mean, sure, we've been done in by thieves about ten times in the last two months, but..."

...I thought he looked perfectly incompetent...

Judging from their conversation, it seemed this man named Claude was Roden's nephew or something, and had landed the position of Head of Security solely through that connection.

"Now listen, Claude. No one thinks you're incompetent."

I was thinking it with every fiber of my being.

"It's just that the opponent is one step ahead of us. Judging by their methods, they're likely seasoned professionals. If that's the case, we have no choice but to use a professional ourselves. However, for the sake of appearances, we can't exactly ask the town guard. That's why I'm asking a traveler."

—I see.

According to my memory, Mr. Roden was supposed to be the purveyor to the local feudal lord.

If word reached the lord's ears that he was suffering from such frequent thefts, he might be banned from the castle on the grounds of sloppy security.

He probably wanted to use a passerby like me to resolve the matter quietly.

"Anyway, Claude. This is my decision. I want you to cooperate with this person. Understood?"

"Uncle!?"

"This is an order from your employer."

"...Ugh..."

Having it laid out so clearly and firmly, Claude was left speechless.

"...Fine, I get it!"

Spitting the words out desperately, he promptly stormed out of the room.

After a brief, awkward silence—

"—My apologies. At any rate, that is the situation, and I would like to ask you to take this job. The reward is—"

"Just so you know, I'm only going to teach you the ropes because my uncle insisted on it."

In the end—

Lured by the deliciousness of the reward, I accepted the job and was supposed to hear the detailed circumstances from Claude...

But that was the very first thing that came out of his mouth.

For a moment, I was stunned.

"I could catch petty thieves like them myself, you know. Well, I just don't know who they are, and I don't want to do anything clumsy and get hurt."

Seethe, seethe, seethe.

The anger came bubbling up a second later.

"Well, I suppose this kind of savage work is for savages—"

BAM! WHACK! KICK!

A rapid-fire succession of my merciless kicks struck Claude directly!

"...Wha... what was that for...!?"

"I forgot to mention—"

As Claude staggered to his feet while shouting his protest, I snapped a finger out at him.

"If you say anything else like that, I'm kicking you again."

"Don't forget to mention things like that!"

"Anyway."

I leaned in close, glaring at Claude with a flat, judging stare.

"It's because you haven't been able to catch a single thief until now that it's my turn. If you have time for such pathetic remarks, hurry up and explain the situation."

"...Fine... I get it... For now... let's go to the warehouse at the scene."

"Whoaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

The moment I stepped into the warehouse, the cry escaped me involuntarily.

Inside the fairly large warehouse located on the manor grounds, countless shelves were piled high with various goods.

There were, of course, things that weren't particularly rare, but—

"Hyo-ho-hoooooo! So many dried Lemur Shells! And these are Lekitite handicrafts over here! Whoa-ho-ho!? This is the legendary phantom...!!"

"...Hey..."

"N-fufufufufu! Treasure! It's treaaaasuuuuure! It's all gonna be mine!"

"Daaaah! No, it's not!"

...Ah...!

At the sound of Claude yelling behind me, I finally snapped back to my senses.

"...T-that's quite an impressive selection. And everything is so valuable."

"Yeah. This warehouse is used exclusively for high-end luxury goods."

He said it matter-of-factly to me as I tried to act calm.

"You said 'this' warehouse... so there are other warehouses besides this one?"

"Of course. Items that aren't worth as much or are too bulky are stored in a different warehouse in town."

"And so—has only this warehouse been targeted so far?"

I asked as I scanned the interior.

One entrance. No windows. The doors were large, double-leafed iron doors.

It was a perfectly ordinary warehouse with no distinguishing features.

"That's right. The town warehouse is guarded by others hired by Uncle Roden. However, the items kept in the other warehouses aren't worth much money. In contrast,

the things kept here aren't very bulky and are all quite valuable."

"I see... and what about the locks?"

"They were opened. Of course, we tried changing the locks several times, but the result was always the same."

"Hmm... and do you have a list of the items stolen so far?"

"Yeah. Here it is."

I looked over the list Claude pulled out from somewhere—

"...Hmm... so nothing 'extremely expensive and rare' has been stolen."

"Yeah. For some reason, everything stolen so far has been just valuable enough to fetch a decent price. —Mind you—when it happens this many times in a row, the total damage is significant."

"I see—"

I thought for a moment.

"—In that case, there's a high probability that the opponent is a professional."

"A professional?"

"Yes. For example, if it's a treasure that only exists in a few places in the world, it certainly has value, but it's hard to sell and easy to track. On the other hand, 'expensive items that are common in the world' can be turned into cash easily and are hard to trace. Besides, if it's a skilled pro, they can easily open any lock as long as they have a single piece of wire. So—what time did the incidents occur?"

"The crimes always happen at night, taking advantage of gaps in our security."

"Don't you have an idea of what time at night? For example, in the middle of the night, or near dawn."

"Well... it's always the same pattern: we sleep soundly through the night and wake up the next morning to find things stolen."

.....?

"...What about the night watch?"

"We don't do it."

...Oi...

"...Uh... why aren't you doing a night watch?"

"Hmph. Do I really have to explain every little thing for you to understand?"

He looked at me with eyes full of contempt.

"Because it's obviously scary to go outside in the middle of the night."

Saying that, he tossed his golden hair back with a flourish.

...Ah... I see...

"Think of the countless ghost stories we were told as kids! When it gets dark and you're rolling a cart by yourself, there's a girl crying by the side of the road. You think she's lost and give her a ride, and after going a little way... Aaaaaaah! Just remembering those stories makes me shiver even now! If I were to remember something like that in the middle of the night, doing rounds would be out of the question! After that, there's nothing left to do but crawl into bed and sleep!"

"...Then... what about the other guards...?"

"Hmph. If I, the Head of Security, am sleeping peacefully, you think everyone else is going to do their jobs properly?"

...Haaaaaaah...

I couldn't help but let out a long sigh.

"...Well... then there's no way the thieves are going to be caught..."

"What was that!? Are you trying to call me incompetent!?"

"...No... it's a problem that exists before we even get to the question of competence..."

"Even now, I've been properly investigating the footprints left behind, and going into town to check if anyone has been trying to sell the same things that were stolen!"

"That's not called 'guarding,' it's called 'investigating'! Anyway! Starting today, we're doing an all-night stakeout, and you're coming with me!"

"Whhaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat!?"

At my words, Claude let out a cry that sounded like the heavens were being torn apart.

"A... an all-night stakeout of all things! There's no way I can do something so terrifying! In the first place, humans fear the dark because of their instincts! To suppress that and guard in the middle of the night is practically going against the laws of nature!"

...T-the laws of nature...?

"Besides, it's not good for your health, and people will point fingers at you for living an unhealthy lifestyle..."

"SHUT UP!"

WHAM!

At the same time as I spoke, my right fist squarely floored Claude.

"Don't act like a spoiled child when you're a grown man! Anyway! If I say we're doing it, we're doing it! Understood!?"

"...W... why me too!? If you want to do a stakeout, why don't you just do it yourself!?"

"Hmph. You really don't understand. A maiden's heart, that is."

"A maiden's heart?"

He wore a suspicious expression for a moment, then looked enlightened and tossed his hair back again.

"Hmph... I see, so that's it. A maiden's heart... to not have noticed it myself, how boorish of me. But if that's the case, we don't have to wait for night; I could just pin you down right here and—"

"YOU IDIOT!"

K-POW!

My kick, fueled by rage, struck the face of the approaching Claude directly.

"How did you interpret it to mean that!? What I'm trying to say is, the thought of me staying up all night on a stakeout while you're snoring away makes me furious, that's all!"

"...T... that's what you call a maiden's heart...?"

"These days, it is! Besides! If I just go and catch the culprit easily by myself, you'll be labeled as incompetent for real. If you don't want that, then help me catch the thieves."

"...Ugh..."

That counterattack seemed to have actually hurt; Claude thought about it for a while and then,

"—Fine. I'll help too..."

He replied with a firm nod.

"—They're here!"

Hiding in the darkness at the back of the warehouse, I spoke in a low voice.

It was the fourth night since we had started the stakeout.

"What do you mean 'they're here'!?"

Claude let out a terrified cry at my words.

It seemed that during the stakeouts of the past few days, he had become completely terrified thanks to the numerous ghost stories I had told to pass the time.

"Shh! Be quiet! It's probably those thieves!"

"What!?"

He let out a small gasp and, along with me, listened for any sign of movement at the entrance.

Eventually—

Clink, clink. Click.

The sound of a lock being opened. And then—

Creak... creak...

With the sound of the doors opening, faint moonlight filtered into the pitch-black warehouse.

From where we were hiding, we could see exactly where they were.

There were four of them.

They closed the warehouse doors again—and then, four faint lights from lamps flickered to life in the darkness.

Soon, they began to scatter and rummage through the goods as they pleased, without saying a word, making only the small sound of creaking floorboards.

Alright. First, I would cut off their escape route.

If we had been staking out from the outside, just closing the warehouse doors would have sufficed, but unfortunately, there was no place suitable for hiding outside.

And besides, I didn't want to get wet from the night dew.

"...Claude, I'm going to circle around to the exit, so when the time is right, you yell 'Don't move' or something. I'll take down anyone who tries to run."

"...Got it..."

Leaving him there, I crept slowly and cautiously toward the doorway. —Alright. Just a little more...

"DON'T MOVE!"

Claude suddenly shouted when I was only halfway to the exit.

—Too early!

Even though I thought that, it was too late! The thieves flinched for a split second, then rushed toward the exit.

Augh! No choice!

I made a dash for it all at once!

The first and second person vanished outside through the doors—

"INVERSE ROYAL CRASH!"

THWACK!

My flying kick struck the back of the third person's head just as they reached the door!

Naturally, I didn't put 'Royal' in the name for nothing. The moment my foot connected, I added a sharp twist.

After confirming the opponent was completely knocked out, I turned back toward the warehouse.

"Yaaaaah!"

Whether out of desperation or not, the fourth person came charging at me with a shout. In his right hand, a single dagger gleamed dully in the faint light of the lamp!

But—not good enough!

WHAM!

As I dodged, my right kick became a perfect counter, striking the man's jaw.

THUD!

He collapsed onto the floor with a spectacular sound.

He was also out cold in a single blow.

"Claude! Take care of these guys!"

I shouted to him at the back of the warehouse, then spun around and leaped out into the night.

I had no intention of letting the first two escape.

If I let them go, they would surely run off with everything they had stolen so far, just the two of them.

Just outside the warehouse, two broken, burning lamps lay on the ground. They must have realized the lamps would be a target and threw them away.

A fairly wise decision.

However, they shouldn't have gotten very far.

As I strained my eyes into the darkness, I saw two figures moving!

Found them!

As I began to run toward them, I chanted a spell under my breath—

"Raywing!"

I cast the high-speed flight spell and accelerated all at once at a low altitude!

As I caught up to the two—

WHACK!

With that momentum, I knocked one of them flat, then circled around in front of them and canceled the spell.

I snapped a finger at them and said,

"That's far enough! Don't think you can escape!"

"...Tch!"

The one who had been knocked over scrambled to his feet, and the two of them leveled their daggers, slowly closing the distance between us.

—That 'slowly' was their fatal mistake.

While the two were inching forward, I chanted a spell under my breath—

"Dill Brand!"

KABOOM!

The men were easily blown away in a single blast.

Hmph. Too easy.

In the hand of one of the fallen men, a sapphire idol gleamed under the moonlight.

Mr. Roden was overjoyed at my success.

This was the day after we caught the thieves.

He praised my performance, and also heaped praise on Claude (who hadn't really done anything), saying 'You both did a great job,' and then turned the thieves over to the town guard.

He said that since they had caught the culprits themselves, it didn't matter if the matter became public.

Thus, I received the promised commission and left Mr. Roden's manor.

That was at noon today.

And now—

Under the cover of darkness, I had returned.

Here—to the warehouse at Mr. Roden's manor.

Using a levitation spell, I climbed onto the warehouse roof, lay flat, and waited for a while—

Eventually, I sensed someone approaching.

Clink. Clink, clink.

The lock on the warehouse made a small sound.

The door opened, followed by a moment of silence. He was probably rummaging for items inside.

...Creak...

Soon, the faint sound of the door creaking.

It seemed he had come out.

Alright. Then it was about time...

I chanted a small spell under my breath, used levitation again, and landed soundlessly in front of the door.

...Click.

The person locked the iron door, spun around, and...

"Whoa!?"

He let out a cry of surprise.

"...H... how...?"

"Well, you see. I thought I'd come catch the real culprit. Claude-kun."

I spoke to him as he looked visibly shaken.

"...H... how...?"

He repeated the exact same words as before.

Well, the 'how' from before meant 'How are you here?', while the 'how' now probably meant 'How did you know it was me?'.

"It's simple. It's because the guys we caught yesterday were stealing such expensive handicrafts. I thought it was strange. No matter how I looked at it, their methods were different. Besides, they said, 'We were asked to steal in town. This is the first time we've broken into this place.' Mr. Roden and the guards didn't seem to listen at all, though—when you consider how unnatural the methods were, there's only one answer! —You were probably taking things out of the warehouse and selling them every now and then for pocket money, and then blaming it on thieves! You didn't steal the big stuff because you didn't want to cause a stir, and to make it harder to trace, and most of all, because you didn't have the guts. However, Mr. Roden, fed up with the repeated thefts, hired me, a traveler, to catch the thieves. Feeling the danger, you went into town secretly during the day—probably through a middleman—and suggested to those thieves yesterday that they break into this place. If they were caught, all the previous thefts would be blamed on them."

At my words, Claude's face was a picture of agitation.

"W... what proof do you have for such groundless accusations...!?"

"...Sigh... you..."

I glared at him with flat eyes.

"You're standing here in the middle of the night, sneaking out of the warehouse with your arms full of stuff, so there's no 'what proof' about it..."

"...Ugh...! You noticed!?"

Of course I noticed. Normally.

Realizing that he could no longer talk his way out of it, he threw all the items he was holding onto the ground!

"Hmph! Since you've noticed, I'm sorry, but I'll just have to shut your mouth! I'll show you my true strength..."

WHACK.

I didn't have the patience for nonsense.

A single kick I threw quite casually easily knocked Claude down.

"What a thing to happen!"

After finishing my explanation, Mr. Roden was furious.

Well, of course.

He had been betrayed by his own nephew, whom he had trusted in his own way.

Though, perhaps being woken up in the middle of the night also played a part in his anger.

"...You...!"

Mr. Roden's voice choked with rage as he looked at Claude, who was tied up with his hands behind his back and looking down in silence.

After staring at him for a while, he turned sharply back to me.

"Miss Lina! This man is no longer my nephew! I can't stand to look at his face anymore! Right now! Take him to the town guard!"

"No way!? Uncle..."

"SHUT UP! I don't want to hear you calling me 'Uncle' anymore! Now, Miss Lina!"

...Well... I understood his anger, but...

"...But Mr. Roden, at this hour, the guard will be..."

"I'll give you ten gold coins!"

"I'm on my way."

And so, taking Claude with me, I headed straight for the guard post.

"...Please... give me a break..."

Before we even left the manor, Claude was whining in a pathetic voice.

"Shut up! Now, keep walking!"

"At least wait until dawn! The night road is scary!"

"...So the weakness for ghost stories wasn't an act..."

"I'm begging you. Just don't hand me over to the officials. If you let me go, I'll give you a hundred gold coins... no, two hundred!"

"Don't lie through your teeth! If you had that kind of money, you wouldn't have been stealing from the shop in the first place! ...Wait, what?"

As we were talking, I stopped dead in my tracks.

That small thing gleaming at the edge of the road under the moonlight was—

"Whoaaa ho ho ho!?"

As I got closer, there was no mistake. It was a single silver coin.

"Lucky! A silver coin! Heh heh! I guess good things happen when you behave yourself!"

I picked up the silver coin and reached for the wallet in my pocket...

.....

Wait.

"It's gone! My wallet is gone!?"

"Hmph. Good things happen when you behave yourself..."

"SHUT UP!"

I gave Claude a kick for his nonsense.

—Calm down. Think back carefully.

I definitely had it when I left the inn. That meant I either dropped it during the stakeout, or when I was confronting Claude...

Either way, the probability was high that I dropped it inside Mr. Roden's manor.

"Claude, I'm going back to the manor to look for the wallet I dropped. You help me look too."

"...Why should I...?"

"Well then, shall we go to the guard post first? Or would you rather wait here by yourself?"

"I'll go! I'm going! I'll help you look for your wallet!"

"Good."

I gave a single nod and headed back to the manor with Claude in tow.

Passing by the side of the house and circling back to the warehouse—

There, I stopped.

The door that Claude was supposed to have closed was open.

The light of a lamp flickered inside the warehouse.

"...What is it?"

Claude whispered beside me.

Of course, there was no way I could know.

Eventually, as the two of us watched for a while, the person who emerged from the door with a bag stuffed full of something was none other than Mr. Roden!?

Was he making a list of the stolen goods?

If so, he was being awfully sneaky about it in the middle of the night...

—Mr. Roden?

Before I could call out.

He noticed us first.

For a moment, his body went rigid so clearly I could see it even in the night.

"—L... Miss Lina!? And Claude too!?"

He let out a voice full of shock.

"...Um, well..."

"When did you realize!?"

Before I could say anything, he yelled.

"...No, well..."

"That's right! Miss Lina! And Claude! I was trying to figure out how to cover up the fact that I'd been embezzling money from the shop when this whole thief business happened! ...I knew immediately that Claude was the culprit... So I thought I'd use this to my advantage!"

He must have been incredibly surprised to be seen by us. He just started blabbing away on his own.

...This guy... he was doing that too...?

Well, there is a law that 'villains must explain exactly what they've done,' after all...

It might be quite convenient.

"I decided to claim that more things were stolen than Claude actually took, and use that to balance the books! With this today, everything should have been balanced!"

He pointed with his eyes to the bag in his hand.

"But then... this time, the shop employees started making a fuss about the thefts! I knew it was about time. I hired you to corner Claude and pin all the blame on him... but I never dreamed you'd see through it this far!"

...Uh... uh...

After thinking for a moment, I pointed a finger sharply at Mr. Roden—no, at Roden.

"Hmph! I saw through it all from the beginning! If you thought you could fool me with a plan like this, you were dead wrong! I've already done my investigation!"

I piled up a mountain of lies.

"Ooooooooooh!"

Claude stared at me with eyes full of respect.

...Well... I could have honestly said 'I didn't notice at all,' but that would have meant both mine and Roden's reputations would be completely ruined.

At times like this, pretending to have known all along was just part of getting along in the world.

He threw down the bag he was holding.

"However! Since you've noticed, I'm sorry, but I'll just have to shut your mouth! Behold my true strength!"

...His behavioral patterns were exactly the same, as expected of Claude's relative.

"Here I come!"

Roden bellowed, pulled a dagger from his pocket, and rushed toward us—

...Let me just say that even the way he was taken down was quite similar to Claude.

Thus, one incident came to an end.

Roden and Claude were both thrown into a cell together.

As expected, Roden's shop was banned by the feudal lord, but apparently, the man who took over as head was working hard to get the shop back on its feet.

Lastly—

I'll just record that the wallet I dropped was never found.

...In the end, I'm in the red again...

(The Guardsman: End)

Town Of Vampires

"Now!"

SPLAT!

Simultaneous with the shout, a barrage of stones, sticks, and ornaments flew through the air. I dodged instinctively, watching them streak past me and strike Naga squarely!

"Uooooooh!"

At that exact moment, about ten armed soldiers leaped out from behind trees, buildings, and fences, weapons in hand! They charged toward Naga, of course, but for some reason, they came rushing at me too!

"Explosion Array!"

CH-BOOOM!

"Waaaaagh!?"

However, they didn't even make it to our position; my single spell sent them all flying effortlessly.

...After I blew them away, I realized that, looking at them, they weren't bandits or thugs, but appeared to be fine, official soldiers. Why on earth would such a group suddenly attack us...?

"Could you give us an explanation!? What exactly is the meaning of this?"

Naga, who either hadn't taken much damage from the initial hit or had already recovered, questioned one of the men who was lying nearby, twitching.

The man replied in a weak voice, "...Before... I answer... I want to ask..."

"What!?"

"...By any chance... are you two... not vampires...?"

"Hmph. Don't make me laugh!"

"Yeah, really. She certainly looks suspicious, but she's not a vampire; she's at least human."

"...I... see..."

Upon hearing our answer, the man let out a weary sigh.

"...Then... it was just a case of mistaken identity..."

—I see.

"Burst Flare!"

"Windy Shield!"

BO-BAM-BOOM!

Our attack spells, unleashed out of sheer irritation, sent the men flying for a third time.

"So, now that things have been settled peacefully, why don't you tell us a bit more in detail?"

"...In what way was that settled peacefully?"

Wrapped in bandages and lying in bed, the captain of the guards spoke in a somehow dissatisfied tone.

"It was settled peacefully for our state of mind. If you have the guts to stir up any more trouble, I'd be happy to respond with another spell."

"Fine! I admit it! It was settled peacefully!"

The captain spoke hurriedly, then let out a small sigh.

"...To begin with, the vampire attacks started appearing in this town about a year ago..."

In his eyes as he looked at us, there was a flash of fear—

...He was probably terrified of the vampires. ...Probably...

"Every night—well, not quite that often, but at a rate of about once every five or six days—young men and women living in the town have been falling victim to a vampire. So, we've taken to knocking down anyone we don't recognize without asking questions, and then asking, 'Are you a vampire?' but... even now, we haven't been able to find the vampire..."

He let out a sigh with a somber expression.

"...I feel like... there's a problem with your method..."

"Young lady, the world wasn't made so that everything could be settled peacefully without problems... You'll understand once you're a bit older."

"...No... that's not what I meant."

"Regardless."

The captain brushed off my words with that same somber expression.

"Because of all this, travelers have stopped coming here out of fear of the vampire, and the town is just wasting away."

"But isn't that... maybe... not because of 'the vampire,' but because they're afraid of 'being beaten to a pulp without question the moment they stop by'...?"

"At any rate, it is a fact that the vampire is the cause of everything."

...He shifted the point again...

"From the looks of it, you two seem to be mages. If that's the case, perhaps you could use some method to catch the vampire's tail. ...It's shameful for us to ask a traveler for such a thing, but we're simply too short-handed. What do you say? Why not consider it a stroke of fate and help us hunt the vampire?"

At the captain's serious gaze, I gave a sweet smile and said,

"No way."

I stated it clearly and firmly.

—It was true that a vampire was a significant threat to an average human or a common warrior or mage. If I accepted a request to subjugate such a thing just because of 'fate' every time, I wouldn't have enough lives to last.

However, that wasn't the reason I refused.

Setting aside ordinary people, before me—Lina Inverse, a swordsman and genius mage—and Naga—who, despite being the 'goldfish poop' following me, possessed immense magical power and infinite vitality—a vampire was frankly no match.

Despite that, there were three reasons I didn't want to take this job.

First, it didn't seem like it would be very profitable.

Second, why should I listen to a request from people who suddenly attacked us?! That was my human reason.

And the third—'I just didn't feel like it.'

If it were an opponent whose location was known, I might have defeated it quickly for some pocket change, but if I didn't know where it was, a tedious job of searching and staking out awaited me.

"...I see..."

The captain let out a heavy breath.

"You're afraid of the vampire after all..."

"That's not it!"

"...There's no need to force yourself... it is a formidable opponent, after all..."

"Hmph! Don't make me laugh!"

Faster than I could open my mouth, Naga fell for the captain's provocation quite easily.

Hey, wait a minute!?

"With Naga the White Serpent here, one or two measly vampires are nothing!"

"It's better not to overdo it. You should value your life."

Without giving me a moment to intervene, the captain provoked her further.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Don't underestimate me!"

"...Hey! Naga!"

"A mere vampire is no match for Naga the White Serpent; I'll show you I can defeat it!"

...Aaaaaaaah! She said it!

"Is that so! You'll defeat it for us!"

The captain spoke in a triumphant tone, seizing the moment.

"...Huh...?"

Naga finally snapped back to her senses, but it was a case of 'too late.'

...Haaaaaaah...

...Well, if it's come to this, I guess I have no choice...

I let out a deep sigh.

"Fine... but in exchange, you guys have to help as much as possible... —So, how many guard soldiers are there in this town in total right now?"

"...Well... twenty..."

"Twenty!?"

The cry escaped me involuntarily.

"Even though this vampire trouble is growing so big, there are only twenty guard soldiers!? What are you doing!? Don't tell me you haven't reported this to the lord!?"

At my words, the captain let out a heavy sigh.

"...No... of course, we reported it to Count Leone of this town, and word has even reached the lord's ears... but he won't get serious about it at all..."

...Hmm... there certainly were some troublesome lords in the world.

But anyway, if we couldn't move more personnel, there was only one method to take!

"In that case, we have no choice but to set an ambush!"

Normally, whether it was out of habit or some such law, vampires had the nature of sucking blood from the same person multiple times. Therefore, naturally, if we set an ambush at the place of someone who had already been targeted once or twice, the vampire would come to us.

Then—we strike!

"So, Captain, are there any recent victims who are still alive?"

"...Yeah... there are..."

At my question, he looked somehow hesitant to speak.

"...About... seventy or eighty people..."

.....

"—Huh?"

I asked back in a hollow voice.

Seventy or eighty people...?

"...For some reason, once it sucks someone's blood, it never sucks from them again."

"It doesn't suck from the same person twice!?"

"Yeah... that's exactly why there are scores of people who have had their 'blood sucked,' but not a single person has died or turned into a vampire yet."

—I see... that was quite a clever way of doing things.

Normally, a human who had their blood sucked continuously by a vampire would eventually grow weak and die, and afterward, the victim themselves would be resurrected as a vampire.

That would be a disaster. If left alone, the number of vampires would increase exponentially.

But—here.

If blood was only sucked once, unless an incredibly large amount was taken, it wouldn't really lead to anything serious. At most, one's physical condition would become slightly off. As long as they didn't mind it, it wasn't difficult to continue living as they had before.

Since there were effectively no deaths and the opponent was a vampire, a lord who favored the status quo would choose to wait and see rather than send out troops.

Furthermore, for the vampire, there was almost no fear of being ambushed, and it could enjoy blood of various flavors every time—a good deal.

"...Hmm... it's a pain that we can't get a handle on the opponent's location or movements..."

"Oh. Don't you know? Where the opponent is."

"What...!?"

At Naga's words, spoken so casually, the captain and I shouted at the same time.

"You... you know...!? What do you mean!? Naga!?"

"Hmph. I wonder what you were listening to?"

She spoke with immense arrogance, then tossed her hair back with a flourish.

"In the story just now, the name 'Count Leone' came up! When you think of a Count, the tradition since long ago is that he's snobbish, a womanizer, eccentric, and actually a vampire!"

"Oh! I see!"

"...Is... is that so...?"

The captain tilted his head. Apparently, he didn't quite understand how the world worked.

I looked at him and said,

"It seems we've found a clue to solving this incident! All that's left—is the matter of the reward!"

"You're actually a vampire, aren't you!?"

"Fuhahahaha! You've seen through me!"

Count Leone flourished his cloak at the tip of Naga's pointing finger and let out a long, loud laugh before—

"—As if such a thing could happen!"

He stated dismissively, turning a cold gaze toward us as he sat down on the living room sofa.

"...So... you're not a vampire then."

"Of course not!"

"...I see—I thought we were on the right track..."

I muttered and sat down on the opposite sofa.

Living in an old house covered in ivy in a forest slightly away from town, with only a few gloomy-faced servants, a handsome man around thirty with black hair, a black cloak, and a pale face—

To have all these ideal conditions and not be a vampire...

What an uncooperative guy.

"—I see... so you've been asked by the townspeople to hunt a vampire."

To be precise, it was the guard, but I decided not to say that for the sake of the captain's reputation.

—Of course, I'd get a hush-money fee later.

"Hmph. That's the way it is."

Naga remained standing, tossed her hair back, and once again pointed sharply at the Count!

"Don't think you can escape from the hands of Naga the White Serpent! It would be easier for you to just be defeated gracefully! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"I keep telling you! I'm not a vampire!"

"Couldn't you just manage it somehow!?"

"I cannot!"

"...Hmm... this is a problem..."

I muttered and crossed my arms.

If this guy wasn't the vampire, the real one had to be somewhere else. Finding it without any clues or leads would be quite a chore.

"—Oh. I know."

I clapped my hands.

"How about we just say 'The Count was a vampire after all' and have you be defeated quietly!? The townspeople will be relieved, and I'll get the request fee! Everyone will be happy!"

"I see! As expected of Lina!"

"It's not 'as expected'!"

However, at my perfect proposal, the Count looked incredibly dissatisfied.

"I'm not going to be defeated as a scapegoat just to 'manage things somehow'! And above all, that wouldn't solve anything!"

"Wouldn't it be fine if everyone was happy? ♪"

"I'd be miserable!"

"It's the duty of those in power to sacrifice themselves for the happiness of the common folk."

"That doesn't fundamentally solve the problem! ...Anyway! I also want the vampire to be defeated!"

"Hmph... for someone who says that, you don't seem very serious about it."

At Naga's words, spoken with a scoff, the Count looked away awkwardly.

"...I also asked the lord for assistance... but he said that since there was no real damage, there was no need to worry about it, and he wouldn't even send a single soldier... I don't have any soldiers of my own... and the guard soldiers in this town have recently started throwing their work aside, saying 'How can we deal with a vampire without reinforcements?' ...But even if there's no actual harm now, it's not a pleasant situation, and there's no guarantee it will end without harm. The dissatisfaction of the townspeople is only growing... Honestly, I'm at my wit's end."

I see. So this was the 'stuck between a rock and a hard place' situation of middle management.

The Count suddenly looked serious and stared intently at me.

"I'm asking you again! Defeat the vampire that's troubling this town! If you do, I'll naturally make the reward worth your while!"

"We'll do it!"

Winning over by Count Leone's enthusiasm and the reward, Naga and I made fists and answered immediately at the same time.

"Oh! You'll take it! —I'll cooperate as much as possible! If there's anything I can help with or anything you want to ask, feel free to say so!"

"Got it. At any rate, what's certain is that the vampire's lair is somewhere nearby! So, Count Leone, I want to ask: are there any caves or underground ruins near this town?"

"How should I know! Find them yourself!"

The Count answered immediately at my question, without even thinking.

"...How... should you know... what a cold response... you just said to ask if I wanted to know something!?"

At my words, the Count thought for a moment.

"Oh! That's right! ...At any rate, my family has traditionally made it a point to immediately forget any promises made to those beneath us!"

...Well... there certainly were many high-ranking people of that type...

"But in reality, I truly don't know, so it can't be helped!"

For some reason, the Count spoke with great arrogance.

"After all, it was only very recently that I was assigned to this town by royal order! I don't like socializing, so I don't go into town much, and naturally, I'm unfamiliar with the geography and rumors!"

"...I... I see..."

In that case, I guess we had no choice but to ask the townspeople or the guard soldiers...

—Well, I didn't think I could hear much of interest from people who knocked down every passerby...

"...Even if you say 'suspicious places'..."

Just as I expected, in response to mine and Naga's questions, the various guard soldiers looked at each other and tilted their heads.

"...After all, the most suspicious place is Count Leone's house..."

"We haven't heard any rumors about underground cemeteries or ruins either..."

They all spoke at once.

"—Then, for example, is there a cave in the mountains or somewhere?"

"There might be that much, but we wouldn't know without asking a hunter."

...Hmm... no clues...

"...Then, for example, have you heard any stories about wolves or bats moving around unnaturally?"

"Wolves and bats aren't rare around here."

"Yeah, that's right. A big bat was fluttering around here before too."

Another man chimed in.

...Hey...

"It happens quite often that a wolf wanders into town too."

"...Um... what about that wolf...?"

To me, who intervened tentatively, the guard soldier spoke in a very bright tone.

"Well, it's a strangely friendly wolf. It just wanders around and doesn't do any harm, so we just leave it alone. I think it came to play about three days ago too."

"It was four days ago, wasn't it?"

Said another guard soldier.

"—Look. It was the night before Jeremy fell victim to the vampire."

Hey, wait...

"Oh! Now that you mention it, that's right!"

"...Um... excuse me... you guys..."

"What is it?"

"Do you know... that vampires can transform into wolves or bats...?"

"We know that much."

The guard soldier spoke in a casual tone.

I let out a sigh.

"...Then let me ask...

One: a vampire can transform into a wolf or a bat.

Two: sometimes a friendly wolf or a big bat wanders through the town.

Three: vampire incidents occur around the same time the bat or wolf wanders through.

Now, here's a question! Answer what you can infer from the above!"

At my question, everyone thought for a moment.

"—Hmph! I've got it!"

It was Naga who raised her voice with great arrogance.

...Had you... maybe not noticed until now...?

"So that wolf or bat is the vampire!"

"Wooooooooh!?"

At Naga's 'sharp reasoning,' all the guard soldiers let out cries of admiration.

"...I see! Then everything makes sense!"

"What brilliant reasoning!"

"But... to think that wolf or bat was a vampire... how unexpected..."

The soldiers praised Naga one after another.

...Don't you guys... have any imagination...?

I let out a small sigh.

"—Anyway, we've decided what to do. First, we wait for that wolf or bat to show up."

"It's here! It's appeared!"

One of the guard soldiers rushed into the station in a panic just after sunset the following day.

"It's here!"

I finished my soup in one gulp and stood up.

I looked at Naga, who had also put down her mug and stood up, and we gave a big nod to each other.

"So!? Is it the wolf!? Or the bat!?"

"It's the wolf! It's wandering around the east side of town right now!"

Alright, lucky!

If the opponent had transformed into a bat, the guard soldiers watching might have lost sight of it before we arrived, but if it had transformed into a wolf, there was less worry about that.

Of course, I had made sure to tell them not to interfere even if they found it.

Naga and I ran through the moonlit town, guided by the guard soldier.

Faint light leaked from the windows of the houses, and the distant clamor from a tavern or something could be heard from somewhere.

Eventually—

In one corner of the town, a guard soldier waved his hand toward us in silence.

Still in silence, I looked where he pointed—

There it was!

Immersed in the shadows cast by the full moon in the eastern sky, a large wolf was wandering around as if searching for something.

—No. In fact, it was probably searching the area.

"...We're going as planned, Naga."

"Hmph, I know."

The two of us exchanged words in low voices, and then Naga chanted a small spell—

"Void Break!"

The moment the light of magical power flickered at the vertices of a hexagram surrounding the wolf!

"——!?"

With a silent scream of agitation, the wolf's form wavered for a moment!

No mistake!

This Void Break was a kind of magic neutralization spell. While it couldn't nullify all magical power, the fact that its form wavered for an instant was proof that it was a temporary form created by magic!

"We found you! Vampire!"

Even before my words were finished, it kicked off the ground in the form of a wolf!

"I'm not letting you get away!"

Naga and I dashed after it!

The wolf glanced back at us.

Awoooooooo!

No sooner had its howl echoed in the darkness than it transformed into a bat and soared into the night sky!

However, we had already accounted for that. The spell had already been chanted.

"Raywing!"

Mine and Naga's voices harmonized, and the two of us took to the air at once!

Using the high-speed flight spell, we followed the bat for a while longer until it eventually headed toward a forest slightly outside of town.

—This place—!

Eventually, the bat vanished through a window that appeared to lead to a basement in a house standing in the forest.

An old stone house covered in ivy—

Of course, it goes without saying. It was none other than Count Leone's house.

"...I see... so that's how it was..."

I canceled the spell, landed on the ground, and muttered.

"Hmph... so it seems that Count was the vampire after all! Ho-ho-ho-ho! Look at that! It's just as I, Naga the White Serpent, suspected!"

Now that I thought about it—I hadn't heard exactly when Count Leone had moved here, but perhaps it coincided with the time the vampire appeared?

The reason he put on a troubled face and said 'I'll give a reward if you defeat it' was likely to divert our attention away from him.

"But now that we know, we won't show any mercy! Let's go! Naga!"

"Hmph! You don't have to tell me!"

The two of us nodded at the same time and headed for Count Leone's house!

"It really was you after all!? You're the vampire troubling the town!"

"Ungh!? You finally noticed!?"

Count Leone flourished his cloak at the tip of Naga's pointing finger—

"—As if such a thing could happen! ...Wait, I feel like I've said this before..."

"You should stop playing dumb."

But I ignored his pace entirely, spoke in a quiet tone, and took a step forward.

"Pl... playing dumb...? What on earth are you talking about...?"

Count Leone continued to play innocent, taking a step back as if pressed.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Don't tell me you think you can talk your way out of it at this late stage!? I saw with my own eyeeeeees a massive bat fleeing into this mansion!"

"...So what about it!?"

"—Meaning—"

I pointed at him calmly.

"The vampire that transforms into a wolf or a bat and sucks people's blood—I'm saying that's you!"

"I keep telling you it's not! It's true that a large bat has taken up residence in the basement of this mansion, but to say that I'm a vampire because of that is an extreme accusation!"

"That kind of excuse—a bat in the basement!?"

With my finger still pointed at Count Leone, I asked back involuntarily.

"The basement... I haven't heard that story!?"

"Yes! Because I didn't tell you! It's been there since I moved to this land by royal order and bought this house through an acquaintance's introduction! There were nothing but coffins lined up! I checked, but they were only filled with ash! I don't use it now, but at some point, a big bat started living there!"

...You... that means...

"—Hmph! I've got it!"

Naga flourished her cloak and puffed out her chest.

"So the basement of this house is the vampire's lair!"

...Normally, anyone would realize that by now...

"What!? That's impossible!"

—Of course, there was also someone who didn't realize it...

"It seems you've woken up the vampire that was sleeping in the basement of this house!"

"Don't be ridiculous! How could you listen to my story and reach such a conclusion!?"

"No matter how I listened to it, that's the only conclusion possible!"

"...Hmm... I don't understand how young people today think..."

"It's not a problem of generational difference! Normally, if the situation is that clear, anyone would think 'That's suspicious'!"

"I see... so among the common folk, that's what you call 'suspicious'..."

Count Leone muttered in an impressed tone for some reason, nodding to himself.

...No... it's not just the common folk; anyone would normally find it suspicious...

...Well... if the guard was like that, I suppose the Count would be too...

"Anyway—now that we know, things are simple. Let's have you guide us immediately! To that basement!"

"Lighting!"

The magical light I released illuminated the stone room brightly.

Just as the Count had said, there were six coffins lined up there.

A quick look around revealed no one in sight, but—

"By the way, Count, do you clean this basement?"

I stopped at the bottom of the stairs and questioned Count Leone behind me.

The reason I had gone out of my way to bring him here was because it was night and all the servants had gone home, and also because it wasn't certain that the Count himself was innocent.

If I were suspicious, I might think he was trying to trick us and trap us in the basement.

"...No... I haven't been cleaning it. I always keep it locked since I don't use it anyway, and I told the servants they didn't need to clean it."

"Hmm... for not being cleaned, it's quite well-maintained..."

—Yes.

The basement, which was supposedly uncleaned, was strangely tidy, and there wasn't even dust piled up on the coffins.

"...Which... means..."

Apparently, Count Leone had also grasped what I was trying to say, as a note of agitation entered his voice.

"One of the servants didn't listen to me and has been secretly cleaning!?"

...He hadn't grasped it...

"That's not it! I'm saying someone you don't know is hiding in this basement!"

"No way...!? A vagrant or something...?"

"Where on earth do you get such conclusions!? It's a vampire, a vampire!"

Whether he didn't want to admit it or what, I don't know, but he was a man who simply didn't move the conversation forward.

If it had come to this, I had no choice but to push things forward myself!

"I know you're hiding! Give yourself up and come out!"

I shouted toward the vampire that had to be lurking somewhere in this room.

A brief silence fell over the underground room—

"Heh... heh heh heh..."

A muffled, low laugh certainly came from somewhere in the room.

And then—

THAM!

The lids of the six coffins flew up at the same time with a violent sound!

What a cheap trick!

But there was also someone who was easily caught by that cheap trick!

"Dynast Breath!"

BOOOM!

Startled by the sound of the coffin lids opening, Naga unleashed her spell!

"...It's over then..."

Standing among the trees where the moonlight poured down, I muttered.

Dynast Breath—a spell that creates a blast of wind around the caster, damaging both the opponent's spirit and body.

Count Leone and I were saved because we were standing right next to Naga, but the vampire probably didn't stand a chance, even if it had been hiding behind a coffin lid.

...Well... after making such a big fuss, being defeated without even showing its face was quite a blow to the vampire's reputation, but that's just the way the world was sometimes.

"Hmph... so the vampire that terrified the town has been destroyed..."

Naga spoke in a triumphant tone, looking at the remains of what was once the vampire's lair.

I looked back at Count Leone, who was slumped on the ground in a daze, and spoke in a deliberately calm tone.

"—So, Count, about the reward..."

"AS IF I'D GIVE IT TO YOU!"

Raising a voice of anger, he scrambled to his feet.

"You destroyed my house! Stop joking around!"

"...I'm being serious, though..."

"That's even worse!"

—Yes.

The spell Naga unleashed when she was startled hadn't just damaged the vampire, but the basement as well.

Normally, that one spell wouldn't be enough to shatter a stone house—

...But for a house that was already quite old, it seemed to have been enough damage...

The Count's house had collapsed from the basement, and the three of us had barely managed to escape from the rubble.

"...B-but anyway, the vampire was defeated..."

"I didn't ask you to destroy my house!"

"B-but that was because the house was old... Oh, I know! This must be a sign from God telling you to 'rebuild your house at this opportunity'!"

"IT'S A COMPLETE MAN-MADE DISASTER!"

Count Leone's voice of anger echoed.

—After this—

The two of us would end up being forced to help clean up the rubble of the destroyed house if we wanted our reward, but that is a story for another time...

...sob, sob, sob...

(Town Of Vampires: End)

Struggle For Herb Hill

"...Kuh...! Give me your... money..."

"Burst Rondo!"

KYU-BOOOOOM!

It was a narrow path in the middle of the forest.

The group of about a dozen bandit-types who had suddenly appeared before me didn't even get to finish their utterly cliché line. With a single spell, I sent them all flying through the air as easily as could be.

"Now then..."

From among the bunch lying there twitching, I grabbed one who looked like he'd taken the least damage by the scruff of his neck and hauled him up.

"...H-hiiiieee!? Have mercy!"

From beneath the scrap of cloth covering his mouth, Bandit Number One let out a pathetic wail.

"Nfufufu. You'd better stop taking the world so lightly. You suddenly swarm around me and say 'hand over your money,' and then the moment you lose, it's 'have mercy aaaaah'? If you want mercy, why don't you hand over what you've got? Hmmmmmm?"

"...T-that's unreasonable!? In the first place, if we had any money, we wouldn't be pretending to be bandits!"

"...Somehow... you suddenly managed to say something that actually makes sense... Anyway! Attempting to rob me, Lina Inverse..."

"Wait!"

A young woman's voice rang out, cutting me off.

"Please! I beg of you... please forgive them!"

As she spoke, a girl about seventeen or eighteen years old with silver hair stepped out from the shadow of a nearby tree.

"...S-Sylvie...!?"

The man slumped near her let out a groan.

She kept her eyes, moist with sadness, fixed steadily on me.

"...I'm asking you... It’s true that what they did is unforgivable. But there are unavoidable circumstances that forced the villagers to do such a thing..."

"...H-hey!? You're the one who said, 'Just knock down some random traveler and take their money'..."

BOGIH.

Sylvie, her eyes still misty, landed a solid kick on the man, instantly silencing him.

Umu! To kick down an acquaintance without even changing her expression!? This one has potential!

"Please! I beg you, please listen to our story!"

"I don't want to. It doesn't sound like it'll be profitable."

I gave her my honest, blunt refusal, but she didn't flinch in the least.

"—In that case, at least come to the village! It's an apology for the rudeness of the villagers. We have nothing, but we can at least offer you a meal...! I'll take the liberty of telling the story while you eat. Whether you accept the task or not is up to you—how about that...?"

"—Hm..."

I thought about it for a moment.

It didn't sound like a very lucrative tale, but there was nothing to lose. I could just eat the meal, listen to the story, and then say "bye-bye"—it wasn't like I couldn't use that rational tactic.

"Fine. If it's just a meal and a story."

I gave my answer and nodded.

"—The truth is, right now... a certain illness is spreading through this village..."

It was a small, nameless village tucked away from the main road.

Perhaps because travelers never came here, there wasn't even an inn or a tavern. I had been invited to Sylvie's house and was sipping the cold herb tea she had served me. It was likely cold-brewed herb tea. The faint, sweet aftertaste was quite good.

"An illness?"

"Yes. —Ah, even though I say it's spreading, it's not the kind of disease that infects other people. It's not immediately life-threatening, but it's very difficult to cure... If left like this, the fields will eventually go to ruin. That would mean we wouldn't even be able to manage the next harvest. We know the cause and the name of the illness, and we know the cure... but for the treatment, we need a certain medicinal herb that acts as a specific remedy."

"...I see. Because you can't buy that herb, you tried to earn money by playing at being bandits—is that it?"

At my words, Sylvie nodded.

"...Actually, there is a place away from the village where that herb grows, but..."

"Then why don't you just go pick it?"

I said this and took a sip of the tea.

"Well... the place where it grows is limited, and that area is the private property of a man named Judack-san. We explained the situation and asked him to let us take the herbs, but the moment he realized they were valuable, he said, 'If you want what grows on my land, naturally you'll pay a fair price,' and... he charged us about the same price as an apothecary would..."

"You see people like that all the time."

I agreed in a tone that suggested it was entirely someone else's problem and drained the rest of my cup.

"...Because of that, if a kind traveler who has nothing to do with the village were to quietly go and pick the herbs for us, it would be a huge help..."

"...I see... so that's how it is."

—Well, in that case, leaving them to their fate would be a bit heartless, and I wouldn't mind lending a hand, but...

"—Wait a minute. Just suppose, hypothetically, that I were kind enough to go pick the herbs. In that case, what happens to the request fee?"

"Since it's an act of kindness, there isn't one."

.....

She answered without a moment's hesitation. After a brief silence, I spoke.

"...In that case, I'll be heading home as soon as I finish eating. Me."

"Wait a minute!? How can you be so cold-hearted when the villagers are in trouble!?"

"Shut up! Even if I were to concede a hundred paces, not having a request fee is... unforgivable... but regardless, more than that! I especially can't forgive that attitude of trying to save money by forcing kindness on someone!"

"Then what about the sick people!?"

"Sickness is all in the mind!"

"....."

Our gazes locked, and a brief silence fell over the room.

"—I understand..."

Just as I thought she was going to argue further, Sylvie unexpectedly put on a somber expression.

"...Yes... you're right... as I thought, without a request fee... it was too much to ask... —Ah! But to think that cold-brewed herb tea would spread such a disease..."

FREEZE!

Her line, clearly meant for me to hear, caused me to stiffen involuntarily.

"...C-cold... brewed... herb tea...?"

I muttered blankly and lowered my gaze to the empty cup sitting before me.

"Yes. Whether the water was bad, or perhaps there was a problem with the leaves... it goes down smoothly, but it seems symptoms appear two or three days after drinking it. —Ah! Come to think of it, I accidentally served that tea to a traveler today too! At this rate, five or six days from now, they'll just drop dead in the middle of their journey."

"...Y-you..."

...I... I see... so that's the play you're making... you wench...

"—Ah. But there's no need to worry. You'll be able to move normally until then, and more importantly, I know exactly where the herbs are. —Even if it's inside Judack-san's

property. By the way, for the guidance fee to that location, I'll be satisfied if you just bring back a little extra herb for me."

As she said this, Sylvie gave a bright smile, and my kick exploded squarely into her face.

"—It's over there—"

Hiding deep in the bushes, Sylvie whispered and pointed toward a single house standing on a small hill.

"That whole hill is Judack-san's private property. He's quite wealthy, and that house is apparently one of his many villas. Every year when this season comes, he brings his attendants and spends time here."

"...The security is awfully tight..."

I whispered.

Even though we were still quite a distance from the house, even from here, I could see the figures of guards loitering about.

"Yes... you can't see it from here, but the opposite side is a cliff. A while ago, some men from the village tried to pick the herbs secretly by climbing up from the cliff side and got caught... Since then, the security has become tight like that."

"....."

I stared at Sylvie’s profile for a moment without blinking.

"...I don't think it's possible, but... you wouldn't be the one who egged them on, would you?"

"How could you say that!? Egging them on! I just gave everyone some alcohol and said, 'If someone were to climb up from behind that cliff and secretly pick the herbs, they'd be the village hero in an instant! I might even fall for them!' I have no memory of telling them to go pick them!"

...Is she a demon...? This one is...

She pulls the strings but claims no involvement. She was what the world calls an instigator.

...Perhaps. It might be for the good of the world and its people if I were to eliminate her right now...

"—But more importantly, the problem is how to steal past the eyes of those guards."

"There's no need for that."

I said this and stood up from the bushes where I had been hiding.

"Wait!? What are you doing!?"

"—Isn't it obvious? Instead of going through all that sneaking around, I'll just charge straight in from the front and mow down everyone who comes at me with attack spells!"

"...N-no! You can't do that!"

"Why? My opponent is just a greedy bastard who won't listen to reason anyway."

"...B-but..."

"Listen, Sylvie."

I placed a hand on her shoulder as she tried to say something more.

"—Human beings, you see, should always be able to understand each other if they talk, without having to use violence. Don't you agree?"

"...H-huh..."

"—Which means, in other words! Anyone who doesn't understand even after talking isn't human! That being the case, whether I knock them down or blow them away with attack spells, nobody's going to complain—that’s the logic!"

As I said this while sticking up my middle finger, Sylvie’s eyes turned into dots.

"So then, let's go with that..."

"W-wait a minute!"

She grabbed my cloak from behind as I started walking.

"...What now...?"

"You don't have to do such a violent thing; you just have to bring back the herbs secretly! Judack-san is actually quite an eccentric person, and he said, 'If you can't pay, and if you can bring back the herbs secretly without hurting the guards, I won't need the money'!"

"...That was the deal...?"

"It is. I completely forgot to mention it."

Don't forget something like that.

"...I see... from his perspective, it's just a game to pass the time... Alright! Interesting! If that's the case, I'll play along! With that game!"

A cool night breeze stroked my cheeks.

—It was a while after the sun had set behind the western mountains that Sylvie and I began our move.

Only the light of the moon and stars remained; the surroundings were already filled with darkness. However, as expected, the number of lookouts loitering near the villa showed no sign of decreasing.

"—A little further... towards the back."

Sylvie whispered as she clung to me, looking down at the villa.

—Yes. The two of us were currently moving slowly through the sky above the villa, using the Levitation spell I was controlling.

The plan was to use the cover of darkness to descend to where the herbs were, have Sylvie pick them like crazy, and meanwhile, I would use spells to put any approaching guards to sleep. This way, as per the conditions, we could successfully obtain the herbs without harming the guards.

As silence filled the air, we eventually reached a point directly above the villa.

—At that moment!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

A familiar, idiotic laugh tore through the silence of the night and struck my brain!

—T-this voice is...!?

When I turned my gaze toward the sound, I saw it—

On top of the villa's highest spire, a single black shadow stood, its cloak flapping in the night breeze!

"Nogegageh!?"

"...Do you... know them?"

Sylvie, who was clinging to me, asked in a frightened voice as I let out an involuntary shout.

—Yes.

It was a face I knew.

—No, I didn't even need to see the face.

As far as I knew, there was only one super-massive idiot who would take joy in laughing loudly atop a roof—

The self-proclaimed greatest rival of me, Lina Inverse, but in reality, just a piece of goldfish poop! She has magic power but no common sense!

Her name is Naga the White Serpent!

"...H-hey!? Why are you doing something like that!?"

In response to my question, she spoke in a tone as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Hmph! A foolish question, Lina! My travel funds ran out and I was hungry, so I was caught sneaking in here to scrounge for food, and naturally, I'm being made to help with the security as an apology!"

...What is "naturally"... what...?

However—with her on the opposing side—

This was bad. Deeply bad.

"Naga! Please! Just stay out of this one case!"

"...Hmph... and here I was wondering what you would say!"

She laughed off my desperate plea.

"You make me laugh! Lina Inverse! Exactly what obligation do I have to stay out of this?"

"The obligation of me treating you to a meal a month ago."

"...!"

Being told that so casually, Naga let out a small groan.

"Who was it who ran out of travel funds, had no money for dinner, and said, 'If you treat me, I'll follow you for the rest of my life'?"

"...Hmph... how naive, Lina!"

She pointed a finger sharply at me.

"Don't think the 'me' from back then and the 'me' of now are the same! If you're going to obsess over the past forever, then I've seen the bottom of your character!"

She was spouting completely nonsensical logic.

"...Well, I suppose it's not impossible to understand why you would fear my true ability. Ho-ho-ho-ho—ugh!?"

In the moment she laughed while thrusting her chest out unnecessarily far, Naga completely lost her footing!

Slip-slide-rattle-thump!

The sound of her scraping against the roof, which sounded incredibly painful, was followed by the sound of something falling.

"...Somehow... she just self-destructed... is she really such a scary person...? That woman?"

"She's a terrifying person. In many senses."

I answered Sylvie’s question.

"The fall just now probably didn't even faze her. —But, since things have turned out like this, I can't carelessly approach the place where the herbs are... If I get too close, she'll launch an attack that'll blow us away along with the herbs."

I could have used a spell to put Naga to sleep along with the others, but after all, it was her. I didn't know when she would suddenly recover and launch an attack.

"Is she really such an indiscriminate person!?"

"It's not that she's indiscriminate, it's that she can't see anything beyond what's right in front of her! The moment the goal of 'repelling us' is dangled before her eyes, she completely forgets the original goal of 'protecting the herbs'! —In any case—"

Whish!

A single streak of white light shot past right in front of my eyes, moving from bottom to top.

Eii! She’s already recovered!?

When I looked down toward where the light had been fired from, I saw Naga, who had already recovered from the damage of her fall! The other guards were also swarming toward us.

"Sylvie! Change of plans! For today, we're retreating once we've confirmed where the herbs are growing!"

I made this unilateral declaration, landed on the roof, canceled the Levitation, and began chanting another spell.

I hugged Sylvie’s body tight.

"Raywing!"

In response to the released words of power, a barrier of wind wrapped around Sylvie and me.

It was a high-speed flight spell—but unlike Levitation, it was somewhat difficult to control, and it had drawbacks like the sum of speed, weight, and altitude being proportional to the caster's magic capacity.

The moment we left the edge of the roof, the wind barrier surrounding us began to fall straight down.

"Hiiiiieeeee!? Wait!?"

"Shut up!"

I accidentally shouted back at Sylvie, who was screaming in my ear.

Before the barrier surrounding the two of us hit the ground, it suddenly changed its trajectory and began racing along just above the surface.

However, I was still carrying the "weight" that was Sylvie. Our speed was only about that of an ordinary full-speed sprint, and it was difficult to gain any more altitude.

"Which way is it!? Sylvie!? Where are the herbs!?"

"—Straight ahead! Almost—there!"

I turned my gaze in the direction she indicated with her eyes, and there, in that one spot, a cluster of the same kind of grass was growing.

"Is that it!? The one with the prickly leaves!?"

"Yes! —But what are you going to do, Lina-san!? We can't escape like this!"

Indeed, as I looked around, guards were literally rushing toward us from all four directions. As she said, it would be difficult to break through in this state without hurting our opponents, but—

"It’s okay! I have a plan! So, Sylvie, take care!"

"...Huh...?"

The instant she faintly knit her brows.

Goge.

I kicked her out of the wind barrier without hesitation!

Having discarded the extra weight, the wind barrier surged in speed. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Sylvie being swarmed by the guards.

...Well... since it was Sylvie, she probably wouldn't die. Besides, everything in life is an experience.

"Sylvie, I won't let your sacrifice be in vain!"

As I flew alone through the night sky, having outrun the guards, I muttered this quietly.

"I thought I was going to dieeeee!"

Although her whole body was battered, it was the next morning when Sylvie returned to her house.

"Whoa! You were still alive!?"

I had been making myself quite comfortable in her house and sat up from my armchair.

"As if I'd die! I managed to outrun everyone and escape!"

"—By saying something like, 'The one who's truly bad is that woman Lina who was with me'?"

"...!"

Seeing her give a small groan, it seemed that was exactly what had happened.

"...A-anyway! This is no time to be relaxing! What are you going to do about the herbs!?"

"Hmph. Leave it to me. Actually, the plan is already set, and I've finished the preparations. —I have something I want you to tell the villagers. I'll need everyone's cooperation."

The wind passed over the grassland with a rustling sound.

Crackle!

I pushed through the undergrowth and arrived back at the villa past noon that day.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! It seems you've come back for more, Lina! But as long as Naga the White Serpent is here, I won't let you have your way!"

Looking down at me from the hill, Naga let out her usual loud laugh. And behind her stood the rest of the guards.

...If it were a straight fight, the others besides Naga would be nothing but small fry, but since there was the condition of not hurting the opponents, slipping through this many people was a bit of a pain. Regardless, I had to do it!

"Here I go!"

While chanting a spell under my breath, I charged straight in!

The others also charged in response—or so I thought, but the rest of the group didn't move from their positions, and Naga also began chanting some spell on the spot.

They've gone for an all-out defense!? How troublesome!

And then, mine and Naga's spells were completed almost simultaneously!

"Freeze Arrow!"

A dozen arrows of cold air formed in front of Naga and shot toward me!

But my spell was also finished! Naga! I'm going to make use of your specialty!

"Dragon Slave!"

The space in front of me wavered for an instant, and it appeared, shielding me from Naga and the others!

The massive dragon with skin the color of darkness, the Demon Dragon!

Naga's Freeze Arrows probably hit this guy, but for someone like him who was completely immune to astral shamanism, it was likely nothing more than a breeze.

Rugwaaaaaaaa!

The giant dragon roared, shaking the air.

Hidden by its massive black body, I couldn't be seen from my position, but I could hear the terrified voices of the guards from the other side.

Without giving any orders to the summoned Demon Dragon, I chanted the next spell.

"Raywing!"

Wrapped in the wind barrier, I slipped past the Demon Dragon and headed straight for where the herbs were growing.

As I thought, most of the guards were completely terrified of the dragon standing before them and didn't notice my movements.

—Yes. My reason for summoning the Demon Dragon was simply to scare everyone.

The opponent likely knew that I couldn't hurt them. If it were just to scare them, I could have fired off a flashy attack spell and let it miss, but even if they were startled for a moment, they would likely recover quickly.

However, having a huge dragon placed right in front of them, even if they knew they wouldn't be harmed, the instinctive fear would prevent them from moving so easily.

—But for everything, there is an exception.

And here too, there was one person who was a stranger to the emotion called fear.

When I glanced back, as expected, I couldn't hear clearly because of the wind barrier, but I saw the figure of Naga chasing after me while shouting spells, boasts, or insults!

The other guards who had been waiting elsewhere were also coming toward me!

Near where the herbs were growing, there were also two guards.

—I have to separate these guys somehow—

I canceled the spell just before the herbs and landed on the ground.

"Hmph. It seems you've realized it's futile!?"

When I glanced back at the voice from behind, I saw Naga standing tall with a triumphant smile. The men who had been near the herbs also left their positions and approached us.

—Good! Now!

I began to chant a spell.

"Hmph! You're quite persistent!"

And Naga did too.

But—I'm not letting you use a spell!

I turned toward Naga, took out what I had prepared for her from my pocket, and slammed it onto my own forehead without hesitation!

Splat!

With a dull sound, something cold dripped from my forehead to my chin.

This was the ultimate anti-Naga weapon: fake blood tucked inside an eggshell!

"Hauhh."

Just as I had read, at the sight of me covered in blood, she fainted instantly.

And my spell was completed! I placed my right hand on the ground and released the words of power!

"Dill Brand!"

It was a spell that interfered with the earth spirits to dig a tunnel—nothing more than that.

But magic depends on how you use it! If I adjusted the position and scale of the tunnel—

Goba!

Almost at the same time I released the spell, the entire area where the herbs were growing collapsed in a circle!

"—!?"

For a moment, the guards stood frozen, unable to understand what had happened.

If I were to reveal the trick, it was nothing. During the night, I had secretly gone around to the cliff at the back and used the same spell to dig a side tunnel. Right up to the area under where the herbs were growing.

And now, I had dug out a tunnel to surround the area where the herbs grew—the thinned ground couldn't bear its own weight and collapsed into the side tunnel below.

Yes. Along with all the herbs growing on top of it.

Likely right about now, the villagers who had gathered near the side tunnel after hearing Sylvie’s message were pulling the herbs out from the dirt.

All that was left was to block any pursuit, and it would be the finish!

Without a moment's pause, I chanted the next spell.

"Demona Crystal!"

—Normally, this spell freezes the target in ice and shatters it to pieces.

However, this time, I changed the content of the spell to alter its effect.

In response to my spell, a massive block of ice suddenly appeared in the empty air and fell straight down—

Thud!

With a heavy sound, it acted as a lid over the ground that had collapsed.

With this, they wouldn't be able to go down the hole and interfere with the villagers' herb collection for a while.

"The medicinal herbs in question have been successfully received by me, Lina Inverse!"

"...Damn it!"

"Since it's come to this, we won't let you leave!"

Enraged by my declaration of victory, the guards came charging at me!

At that moment.

"—Stop!"

A single shout echoed through the air, and the movements of the guards came to a dead stop.

Eventually, the ranks parted, and an old man with sharp eyes, white hair, and a white beard slowly walked out from the villa toward me.

—If so, this person must be—

"This is our first time meeting. I am the owner of this villa, Judack."

The old man spoke, then looked back at the guards.

"—That's enough. The match is decided. We have lost. Withdraw."

Surprisingly, he admitted defeat quite easily.

...Something about this... is different from the image I had...

He looked back at me.

"Hm... normally I would scold these recruits, but it seems you were quite a bit above their level. Even if I had used veterans, it likely would have been impossible to stop you."

"...Recruits...?"

"—I didn't think that thief-girl would have a subordinate of your caliber. The result didn't follow much logic, but a promise is a promise, and a loss is a loss. You may take the herbs."

"...Um... recruits and subordinates... I feel like the story is slightly different from what I heard..."

"—What? You don't know the circumstances? Even if I look like this, I am a military man. Currently, I am mostly training recruits. Every year at this time, I bring them here for training in the fields—but one day, a village girl named Sylvie came sneaking in. I caught her and yelled, 'If you want someone else's property, pay for it,' and she turned around and said, 'If I get serious and use my subordinates, this level of security is a joke'."

...Somehow... I feel like the story is a bit different...

"So I also spoke out of pride and said, 'Without harming the guards, if you can do that, take whatever you want'."

...W-well... that was...

"...Um... in that case, you didn't hear the story about the illness...?"

"Illness? Who?"

Judack-san said this and knit his brows.

—Hah!? If so, then could it be!?

"Excuse me!"

I bowed to the old man, chanted a spell, and headed toward the cliff at the back.

I leaped off the cliff.

"Levitation!"

I used the spell to land softly at the bottom.

Right before my eyes—I stepped into the side tunnel I had opened in the cliff.

—If things were according to the plan, the villagers Sylvie had called together should be in the back, collecting the herbs like crazy—

But.

What I found there was Sylvie, all alone, busily collecting the herbs by herself!

"Sy... lvi... e...?"

Twitch!

In response to my low call, she turned around and her whole body convulsed.

"...A-aha... you're early..."

As she spoke, a single drop of sweat rolled down her cheek.

"I wonder why you didn't call the villagers?"

"...N-no, well, that's...!"

"I heard you didn't tell Judack-san that the villagers were in trouble because of an illness, did you? —Don't tell me you were planning to keep the herbs a secret from the villagers, get them yourself, and then sell them to everyone later at a decent price to make a profit!?"

"Of course not! No, that's wrong!"

She shook her head firmly at my question.

"...A decent price...? Naturally, at the market price..."

"THAT'S EVEN WORSE!"

WHAM!

My special kick of anger drove the top of her head straight into the ground.

—Thus, peace returned to the village.

The herbs brought back easily eradicated the illness that had spread. I myself, perhaps because I drank the herb tea or because the herb tea was harmless after all, didn't end up getting sick.

—And one more piece of good news.

As for that Sylvie, in the end, through my mediation, she ended up working for Judack-san for the amount of the herbs' market price. In technical terms, it's called "snitching on her misdeeds."

Right about now, under some distant sky, she's probably being worked to death along with Naga.

All’s well that ends well.

(Struggle For Herb Hill: End)

The Terrifying Future

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! To think you'd try to take us on with that level of skill—you really don't know your place, do you? Well, you'd better go back and train for another ten years or so!"

I looked down at the swarm of bandits who had been knocked flat by a single one of my spells. The person letting out that boastful, high-pitched laugh was my usual acquaintance, Naga the White Serpent—or so it seemed, but it wasn't.

Her pointlessly arrogant attitude was the same, but she had wavy blonde hair and wore red clothes so flashy they made my eyes hurt. She was covered in various jangling, shiny gold accessories on her ears, neck, and limbs! She was certainly a beauty, but she was the type of girl who guaranteed you'd have a terrible time if you associated with her the wrong way. This was the person I was supposed to protect this time—Sirene Fitzmeyer.

If you heard the name Fitzmeyer, it might ring a bell for some. She was the daughter of Gherio Fitzmeyer, a merchant with a bit of a reputation around the Coastal States. I had been asked by Gherio-san personally and, lured by a delicious request fee, I ended up accepting this job.

The content of the work was quite simple. I just had to deliver her safely to a villa in a village a short distance away. After that, I would hand her over to the villa's caretaker, receive the reward, and that would be it. If everything went smoothly, it was a journey of about three days.

—However.

The problem was her personality.

"...I... I wasn't beaten by the likes of you..."

Sirene formed a cold smile at Bandit Number One, who was twitching at her feet but still talking back.

"Indeed. It wasn't I who defeated you. It was just a temporary guard my Papa hired with money. To be beaten so easily by such a thing—aren't you ashamed? Well, I suppose it's doubtful whether someone of your level, who doesn't even realize their own words aren't even a proper case of sour grapes, possesses a sophisticated emotion like 'shame.' Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

...This was the kind of personality she had.

"...I... I feel so incredibly frustrated..."

Bandit Number One, unable to find a way to argue against Sirene's high-pitched laughter, wept while remaining sprawled on the ground.

I get it! I understand that feeling, Bandit Number One!

After all, from the day I met her, she was like this about everything. She took detours, insisted on eating only expensive food, and wanted to rest immediately after walking just a little. Before we had even covered half the distance, the scheduled three days passed in a flash, and on top of that, she complained to me that "the journey isn't progressing."

When I got annoyed and lightly blew her away with just two or three attack spells, she went so far as to say, "I won't pay the reward!"

—Her father, Gherio-san, might have had talent as a merchant, but it seemed he wasn't very blessed with the talent for raising children.

But nevertheless.

It was on the night of that day that she truly started spouting ridiculous things.

"—Why do I have to eat in such a poverty-stricken place!?"

Sirene said that with a displeased face during dinner. She didn't like the dining hall I had intended to go to.

"...Because someone was being extravagant and lazy, the travel funds have become unreliable."

I looked at her with dead eyes and spoke. The request fee included necessary expenses. If the trip had gone smoothly, a considerable amount would have been my profit, but due to the delays and Sirene's extravagance, my earnings had decreased significantly. The portion I received as an advance was almost gone.

However, she didn't flinch at all at my words.

"Look at that. You're always so quick to try and blame others. It’s a manifestation of a miserable soul."

"Daaaah! Fact is, it's clearly your fault, isn't it!? Entirely!"

I knew it was useless to speak, but my voice grew rough anyway.

"What are you talking about? There's still plenty of money for the request, right?"

"Listen here! Why on earth should I sink the entire request fee into putting up with your selfishness!?"

"Selfishness? I'd prefer you call it 'the sponsor's request.' Besides, I'm being quite patient even now. Until yesterday, I didn't even complain at those lower-tier first-class restaurants where a single waiter was in charge of two or three tables, did I?"

"...I feel like you called the chef out and said some pretty outrageous things...?"

"I meant to you. —Ah, geez. When I was with Papa’s servants, I wasn't this restricted. Can't you do something? About the money."

She said it as if it were only natural for me to handle it.

...T... This brat—wait, she was older than me, but still...

"I can't. —And while I'm at it, if you keep being selfish about being tired of walking or what you want to eat tonight, eventually we'll end up sleeping outside without any food!"

"You can't be serious! ...In the first place, why do I have to walk on my own two feet?"

"You're the one who threw a tantrum about wanting to go to the villa, aren't you? Gherio-san said so. —Besides, if you hated walking on your own feet so much, you should have begged your kind Papa to prepare a horse or a carriage for you."

However, even at my irony, she didn't change her expression at all.

"I hate horses because they smell like animals. I dislike carriages because they sway mindlessly."

...Don't ever go out again. Ever.

Sirene let out a big sigh.

"—But really, we have to do something about the money... my own pocket money is running out, too."

"Your pocket money is running out...? Wait, you actually had money?"

"Is that not obvious?"

"But, you say it's running out... even though I'm paying for the meals and the inn out of the request fee... How on earth did your personal money decrease?"

"Isn't it obvious? I buy new clothes every day."

"....."

I was momentarily speechless at Sirene's words, which she spoke as if it were common sense.

...True, I had noticed she wore different clothes every day... I had wondered how she fit that many clothes into her somewhat large bag...

—To think she was actually buying new ones every day...

"I don't feel like wearing underwear that’s soaked with sweat from walking around a second time, and I get bored of clothes after wearing them for a day. They get wrinkled, and they get dirty with dust and things. If I throw away dirty underwear or clothes I don't like, naturally I have to buy new ones, don't I?"

I felt a sudden wave of dizziness.

...T... This girl... was she doing something so wasteful...?

Does the concept of washing them and using them again not occur to you!? Not at all!?

As for me, every single day when I stay at an inn, I'm scrubbing my own belongings alone!

Eii! You don't have the qualifications to be a merchant's daughter!

"—At any rate, money is necessary. To be honest, the reason I said I wanted to go to the villa and that I didn't want the shop servants to accompany me was, frankly, because I wanted to let loose away from the eyes of people I know. But if I'm this short on money, I can't even let loose properly."

The stupid girl kept spouting whatever she wanted, without noticing my internal rage.

"—Hey, Lina, why don't we just pretend I've been kidnapped and get money from Papa? That way, we'll have plenty of time and money to play around, right?"

"...I... I see..."

With a strained smile on my face, a certain plan flashed through my mind at that moment.

"Hooo. Two women traveling alone? Isn't that a bit dangerous? After all, people like us occasionally show up on the road."

At the line spat by the man who seemed to be the leader, the rest of the bunch erupted in laughter.

Those bandits appeared before me and Sirene as we walked the path a little after noon the next day.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! You've certainly picked the wrong target. As expected of lowly bandits, you have no eye for people. Well, I suppose you should resist as much as possible. —Alright then, I'll leave the rest to you."

Sirene tried to step aside after saying her piece, but I grabbed her shoulder from behind with a firm grip!

"...W... What is it!?"

As she turned and asked, I gave her a wide grin.

"...By the way, you were saying it yesterday. About pretending to be kidnapped and doing this or that. This is perfect, isn't it? You don't have to go through the trouble of pretending to be kidnapped if you actually get kidnapped."

At my words, her face turned pale instantly.

"...W... Wait a minute...!? What do you mean by that!?"

"I mean this."

I turned toward the bandits.

"—You know Gherio Fitzmeyer, right? He's a somewhat well-known merchant. This person is his daughter, named Sirene-san. You'll get money if you catch her."

At my words, the bandits looked at each other suspiciously.

—Good, good. This is some pretty good acting.

"What are you planning!?"

To the leader's question, I replied quite casually.

"In short, I'm saying I'm leaving this girl here and heading back."

"Wait a minuteeeee!? Just what are you thinking!?"

"I'm thinking about abandoning Sirene-san."

I said that with a bright smile.

"I've finally gotten sick of putting up with your damn selfish whims."

"No way!? That's a breach of contract! Don't you want the reward!?"

"I don't need it. If it means I have to put up with your selfishness from here on out, that is."

At my words, her face went completely white.

Good. It’s working, it's working.

I turned toward the bandits again.

"—So? What will it be? If you won't accept these terms, it means you'll have to fight me first, right?"

"...Hmph..."

The lead bandit gave a small snort.

"A single girl like you would be nothing to us... but well, if you're offering us a cash cow, there's no reason to force a fight. It would be a waste to get a silly injury by some million-to-one chance."

He wore a broad grin as if to say, "We're both villains, aren't we?"

Oho. He had quite the acting ability for a bandit. If he weren't a bandit, he might have been successful as an actor.

"Okay. The deal is struck. I'll leave this person to you then. Cook her, grill her, do whatever you like."

"Wait a minuteeee!? You're not serious, are you!?"

Sending a cold gaze to the clinging Sirene while desperately holding back the urge to laugh, I said,

"I'm serious. Well, just give up and accept that being abandoned like this is the result of your daily behavior and bad personality. Well then, Sirene, adieu."

With that, I chanted a spell—

"Raywing!"

Using the high-speed flight spell, I quickly left that place behind.

"—I wonder if she finally reflected on herself. After going that far."

That night. While eating dinner at an inn in a certain village, I muttered to myself.

—If you're quick-witted, you've probably realized it by now. Yes, that incident during the day was entirely a setup staged by me. It goes without saying that those bandits were shills.

—Last night.

When Sirene was blathering on about playing around with a fake kidnapping, this was the plan that popped into my head.

The "Give her at least one scary experience and she might reflect a little" plan!

Last night, I had slipped out of the inn alone, raided a nearby bandit gang, beat them to a pulp, and then requested their cooperation for the plan. Ironically, my disgraceful alias of "Bandit Killer" proved to be very useful here.

And then, just as I executed during the day.

I handed Sirene over to the bandits while pretending to abandon her.

—Of course, I had properly instructed the bandits to scare her as much as possible but absolutely not to harm her.

After that, I just had to pick the right moment to "rescue her from the bandits" and give her some appropriate excuses and a lesson. If she learned that there are people in the world for whom parental influence and logic don't work, she'd probably quiet down a bit. It was a rather rough tactic, but since the parent hadn't done the minimum education, someone had to do it.

Normally, there would be a possibility that the bandits would betray me and truly take her hostage, but I had told the bandits, "If the plan goes well, I'll pay a certain reward. But if you betray me, I'll chase you to the ends of the earth and beat you until you die." Above all, seeing how terrified they were when they heard my name, they probably didn't have the guts to break the promise.

"Nfufufu. Per-fect."

I said that and took a sip of herb tea.

"Well, that's good. I don't know what it is, but I'm glad it went well."

As she spoke, Naga bit into some fried chicken.

"I guess."

I nodded...

.....?

"Waaaaah!? Naga!? Since when!?"

I stood up from my seat, unintentionally letting out a scream. I didn't know when or where she had appeared from, but when I noticed, Naga was sitting leisurely in the chair across the table, munching away at the dinner set I had ordered!

"What are you saying, Lina? I walked in quite openly and sat down quite openly just now."

"...I... I see! Surely it was because there was no high-pitched laughter that I didn't notice..."

Finally regaining my composure, I sat back down.

"...Wait, Naga! Why are you eating someone else's food without permission!? This is my Dinner Set C!"

However, despite my protest, Naga continued her meal casually.

"...Hmph... You're narrow-minded, Lina Inverse. To get so worked up over a mere dinner set. —Well, if you say you don't like it, I, Naga the White Serpent, wouldn't mind picking up the tab here."

"...Eh...? Does that mean... you're treating me?"

"In plain terms, yes."

"...You're... being generous today."

"I suppose."

Naga nodded and ordered an extra dinner set and some liquor from the diner's owner.

"—It's not like I'm imitating you, Lina. Actually, today, a little before noon, I happened to run into a group of bandits on the road. I twisted them a bit and received what was offered."

"Huh."

"They were quite laughable opponents. Whether they feared me, they desperately lined up excuses, but those excuses were hilarious. 'We are acquaintances of that Lina Inverse. We have a promise with Lina and there's something we have to do now, so let

us pass for this moment,' they said. ...Honestly... to be that full of nonsense is quite an achievement. Ho-ho-ho-ho."

Twitch!

However, I couldn't laugh at Naga's words at all.

"...W... Wait... Naga...?"

I opened my mouth fearfully. I could tell my own voice was trembling.

"...Those... bandits... said they were my acquaintances and they had a promise with me... right...?"

"That's right."

Naga answered quite casually.

"...And... Naga, what did you do with those bandits...?"

"What did I do...? Naturally, I had no obligation to show mercy. I blew them away without further ado. —Judging by their state, they likely won't be making a comeback for a while."

.....

"...S... So... I want to ask one more time... it was before noon, right...?"

"That's what I said."

She nodded her head ruthlessly.

...The bandits I had asked to be shills were blown away by Naga before noon.

Which means, those bandits I handed Sirene over to were...?

"Dammit allllll! Those were a different group entirelyyyyyy!"

My scream echoed through the small shop.

"Hmph... You're still quite immature, Lina. To make such a rookie mistake as to confuse them with another bandit gang."

After hearing the full explanation of the circumstances from me, Naga spoke. This was while we were walking along the road at night to rescue Sirene, whom I had handed over by mistake.

"...B... But... bandits all have similar faces, don't they? Telling those featureless guys apart is harder than telling dogs and cats apart..."

"Well, in any case, you'd better find those bandits quickly. Otherwise, who knows what kind of experience that Sirene-san will have."

Stab!

Hit right where it hurt, I momentarily stumbled.

"...W... Well, anyway..."

I started to say, then stopped dead in my tracks. Beside me, Naga also stopped.

—Nearby, there was a presence watching us. The number wasn't large. Probably—two people.

"Come out. I know you're hiding. —If you don't come out—"

"Wawawa!? Wait! Please wait, Lina-san!"

Before I could even finish my line, two men in bandit attire appeared before us, for some reason calling my name.

"Who are you guys?"

"...W... Who... you say... Did you forget!? Look! Yesterday, we were bullied by Lina-san... I mean, you took care of us, and you asked us for a favor..."

"—The bandits from yesterday!?"

"Yes. Two of them."

They spoke, casting a fearful glance at Naga.

"...B... By the way... is this lady also an acquaintance of yours, Lina-san... or something...?"

"I guess so. I've heard the general gist. You ran into this one at noon and got beaten up?"

"T... That's right. Me and a few others were lucky enough not to have any major injuries... In the end, it means we broke our promise to you, Lina-san, so we had to meet you and apologize. We were looking all over for you... but when we saw you were with that lady there, we accidentally hid ourselves."

"I see. —The talk about the promise is fine now. More importantly, there should be another bandit group nearby besides yours. Do you know them?"

The men glanced at each other for a moment.

"...Yes. We know them, generally speaking...?"

One of the men opened his mouth.

"Do you know where their hideout is?"

"...I don't know the details... but I'm certain it's toward the western forest. There's a small rocky hill at the edge of the forest, so I think it's around there..."

I thought they might refuse, saying they couldn't sell out their peers, but they answered surprisingly easily. Either they feared me that much, or they were normally in conflict with that other group.

"I got it! Thanks! —Let's go, Naga!"

"Why?"

Slip.

I was so completely thrown off by her cold-toned question that I fell flat on my face.

"...W... Why... you say... That's why! We have to rescue Sirene, don't we!?"

"And... why do I have to go along with that?"

Ugh...! Damn, she noticed! I was planning to involve her in the confusion and make her help for free!

—But since she noticed, it couldn't be helped. I let out a small sigh.

"...Fine. I'll reward you if you help me."

"Reward me—don't tell me you're planning to just hold my hand and say, 'Thanks, Naga, you were a big help,' and deceive me with that?"

Twitch!

I was momentarily shaken by her hitting the bullseye. That said, I didn't want to pay Naga any reward...

If it were just a matter of beating up the bandits, I could do it alone. However, this time, since Sirene was in their hands, if I charged in from the front, they would surely take her

hostage. Therefore, it would be better if Naga, whose face wasn't known, raised a high-pitched laugh and defeated the bandits in the confusion to rescue Sirene.

In that case, I really did want Naga's help.

I thought for a while.

"...D-don't be ridiculous. Well then, I'll be bold and offer... five copper coins!"

"".....Lina....."

"It’s a joke, a joke! —Silver... silver... nine coins!"

The fact that I couldn't bring myself to say ten was the tragedy of my own being.

Naga let out a small sigh.

"...Fine. After all, the opponents are just mere bandits. With my skill, they're not even worthy of being called enemies. —In fact, I don't mind helping for free."

"Really!?"

"Yes. So, you'd better be grateful for the rest of your life."

"...I'll... pay the help fee properly..."

A faint flicker of flame dimly illuminated the trees of the forest.

Just as those bandits had said. The hideout of the bunch who had captured Sirene was in a cave carved into a rocky hill at the edge of the forest. At the cave's entrance, there was a small bonfire and one bandit lookout looking bored.

"I'll put him to sleep, then we charge inside."

I whispered to Naga in the bushes where we were hiding and began to chant a spell.

"Sleeping!"

Simultaneously with my spell, the lookout slumped over and collapsed on the spot.

—But.

"Hey!? What's wrong!?"

At the same time the man collapsed, I heard someone's flustered voice.

...Eh...?

Without pause, a man appeared from the shadow of a nearby tree.

—I see. Originally, there had been two lookouts. One of them had gone into the forest for a bathroom break or something, and that's when we arrived. I judged there was only one lookout, and when I put him to sleep with a spell, the other one returned—that was likely it.

However, by the time I realized it, it was too late.

"—It’s an attack!"

The man's voice echoed through the area.

"What!?"

"Who's the opponent!?"

Shouting various things, bandits began jumping out of the cave one after another.

Damn. I guess there's no choice but to use force!

"—Naga, go ahead..."

Before I could give the instruction.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Just who is the idiot trying to defy us!?"

I certainly recognized the voice of the person who appeared from the cave.

"—Sirene!?"

I let out a shout and involuntarily jumped out from the shadow of the trees.

—Yes.

Standing arrogantly with her arms crossed in the middle of the bandits was none other than Sirene Fitzmeyer herself. At the very least, she didn't look like she was being held hostage...?

"My, Lina-san, what business could you possibly have now?"

"...W... What... business..."

I couldn't say "I came to rescue you" in this situation and unintentionally hesitated for a moment.

"M-more importantly... why are you being so friendly with the bandits...?"

"—Well, I suppose it's my personal virtue."

"Should we finish her off, Sirene?"

At the moment the man who seemed to be the leader placed his hand on her shoulder.

Gegobe!

Her merciless kick knocked the man flat!

"I told you not to touch me with your filthy hands, didn't I!? You'll get my clothes dirty! Besides, I don't recall giving someone like you permission to call me 'Sirene' so casually!"

The kicked man, while still on the ground, blushed slightly and put a hand to his mouth.

"...Ah... wonderful! Lady Sirene..."

Shudder!

An involuntary chill ran down my spine.

...I... I see. So the leader of these bandits had that kind of fetish.

And luckily—or unluckily—it seemed to have perfectly matched Sirene's haughty personality.

"...Hmph. You're not planning to say you came to rescue me now, are you!? Well, fine. In any case, I was thinking I had to pay you back for abandoning me during the day. It saves me the trouble. —Everyone! This one uses magic! Scatter into the forest!"

"Aye!"

Under Sirene's command, the bandits dispersed among the trees.

—They were more organized than I thought.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! How is it? I perfectly understand your hand, you see. If we do this, you won't be able to defeat them in one blow!"

Whether she intended to win with this, she stood with a defiant posture and a high-pitched laugh. Naga knit her brows and pointed at her.

"...Lina... what is that? That weird thing...?"

"...W... W... WEIRD THING!?"

It seemed that being called a "weird thing" by Naga had touched a nerve; Sirene's eyebrows shot up in anger.

...Well... anyone would be mad if Naga called them a weirdo... normally...

She also refused to back down and pointed sharply at Naga!

"Ha! What are you, then!? For someone who calls others weirdos, you're wearing an outfit that shows no sense of shame or public decency!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! You truly make me laugh! To think you don't understand my sense of fashion!"

"Just where in that is there any sense!?"

Sirene became increasingly heated at Naga's relaxed tone of complete condescension.

"You're surely just wearing that because you don't have the money to buy fabric and are being cheap, right!? I could buy dozens of those outfits for the price of my cheapest bracelet!"

However, Naga casually laughed off Sirene's words.

"...Hmph... You've finally exposed your immaturity."

"...I... Immaturity...!?"

"My. Isn't that right? If there were logic that something is fashionable just because it involves a lot of money, then the most high-sense people in the world would be the staff at the gold coin mint. If you can't even understand that much, you're not just immature, you're out of the question! ...Well, for someone who believes that just jangling expensive accessories for show is fashion and takes joy in it, it would be impossible to understand true fashion even if I explained for a hundred years. Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"...W... W... W... WHAT DID YOU SAYYYYYY!"

With the blood rushing to her head at Naga's words, Sirene stomped toward us.

"You've said quite a lot! Realize what happens when you speak like that to me!"

Saying so, she raised her right hand toward Naga—

Bobe.

She was hit squarely in the face by Naga's nonchalant right kick and fell flat on her face instantly.

"Ah! Sirene-san!"

The bandits, seeing her easily defeated, came out in a panic.

—It goes without saying that it didn't take much time for mine and Naga's attack spells to finish off the bandits who had foolishly shown themselves.

"—It's my loss—completely—"

A while after the bandit group had been annihilated. Sirene, who had finally regained consciousness, spoke and knelt at Naga's feet.

"...I was defeated in the talk of fashion... and I was also beaten in strength... Hmph... To think that I would lose so perfectly... it's the first time in my life..."

"Hmph. Well, don't be so depressed."

Naga spoke with an incredibly arrogant tone and puffed out her chest.

"Compared to me, of course, you still have a long way to go, but even so, you have quite a bit of potential."

"Really!?"

Naga's words were clearly a lie, but Sirene's expression brightened with hope.

"Hmph. Yes. If you train properly for a bit longer, you'll be a full-fledged one too."

What kind of training? What?

"Please let me call you Master!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! If that is what you wish, then that is fine too!"

...Hey, now...

Why did it turn out like that? These two.

Without paying any attention to me, whose eyes had involuntarily turned into dots, Naga pointed toward the night sky.

"Now! Then first, it's a high-pitched laugh toward the moon!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"Not yet. Your laugh lacks a certain sense of poise. One more time!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"It's gotten a little better. Now, practice hard!"

—At that moment.

As I watched the two of them laughing their heads off, a vision of the future flashed through my mind, as if a shrine maiden were receiving a divine oracle.

—No way... In the not-so-distant future... could it be that the world will be filled with nothing but people like Naga—?

Heaven help us.

(The Terrifying Future: End)

Path To The Strongest

"Don't want to get hurt? Then how about you hurry up and hand over the goods?"

The mundane, cliché threat was familiar to my ears, but it wasn't directed at me. I was walking along a forest highway when those words suddenly jumped out at me. Most likely, some traveler was being ambushed by bandits—a common enough situation. If that was the case, there was only one course of action for me to take! I'd burst in, beat the bandits to a pulp, strip them of their valuables, and then squeeze a little reward money out of the person who was being attacked! Once I decided on that, it was time for immediate execution! I began chanting a spell and dashed toward the voice. Eventually, through the stand of trees, I saw about ten thug-like men surrounding a single man. All right!

"That's far enough! ...is what I'd say while casting Flare Arrow!"

Kyugogogooon!

Taking the spell head-on, the men were easily blown away. Hmph. Against me, the swordsman and genius sorceress Lina Inverse, a mere ten bandits didn't even count as a warm-up! All that remained was the single man who had been under attack, standing there. He looked to be around twenty years old. He had short black hair and dusky skin. To be blunt, he didn't look like a rich man, but I had to say what needed to be said! I turned toward the man, flashed a sharp V-sign with my fingers, and spoke.

"Hmph! That's the end of those bandits! Doing a good deed feels great, doesn't it? —On that note, as for a reward, even a tiny bit is fine, but more is always better!"

"A reward? Oh. Well, I'll give you my thanks for now."

"...No... I was hoping you'd express your gratitude with an actual object rather than just words..."

"More importantly—you're a sorceress, right? Actually, there's something I want to ask of you. How does ten gold coins sound?"

"Out of the question."

I let out a sigh of disappointment and spoke bluntly.

"If it's just ten gold coins, I can probably find that much just by rifling through the pockets of the bandits I just floored."

"—True, these guys might have had that much on them. But let me tell you, these guys weren't bandits."

"Not bandits?"

When he said that, I looked at the fallen men for the first time. To the eye, they were dressed in a way that gave them no right to complain about being called bandits, but...?

"Yeah. —Well, they're thugs either way."

"—But if that's the case, then who on earth are they, and why were you being targeted?"

"Well, it's a long story. How about this? Standing around talking here is a bit much, so how about we head to a nearby village and eat while we talk? I'll treat you to a meal, at least."

Hmm. Putting aside whether or not I'd take the job, I felt like a failure as a human being if I refused a "free meal."

"Fine. I'll listen to the story, at least."

—However, I hadn't realized it then. That at this very moment, I had already reached a point from which I could no longer escape.

"My name's Lag. I'm a freelance pugilist."

In a small tavern in a small, distant village, he began his explanation while gnawing on a piece of teriyaki chicken leg. By the way, a pugilist is, to put it simply, one of those people who earns money by beating people up in public. In large towns, there are venues specifically for pugilist matches where spectators bet money on who will win and experience the highs and lows of the outcome.

I had gone to see a match once before, but I just couldn't bring myself to like it. The reason was simple—the venue smelled like sweat. These fighters often had sponsors with rotten personalities who "liked watching brawls more than their three meals a day," so freelancers were relatively rare. I didn't know how good of a pugilist this Lag guy

was, but since he was freelance, he was either incredibly skilled or incredibly pathetic. He suddenly squeezed his fist tight and spoke in a heated tone.

"Having been born a man and walking the path of a pugilist, my goal is naturally to be the strongest in the world! So I've been traveling from town to town alone, challenging various opponents to battle!"

"—I get that. So, why were you being targeted?"

"Once, in the town of Lyukney, there was a man who held the title of the strongest! His name was Gurka! A man who fought his way up with his fists alone and gained wealth and honor! But now, he's retired and acting as a sponsor for other pugilists!"

Whether or not he intended to answer my question, he continued his story, getting worked up on his own.

"I wanted to fight him! I wanted to try fighting a man who had become a legend! My blood burned hot! I visited his mansion and requested a challenge! But he's already retired! Besides, he brushed me off, saying he couldn't accept every challenge from a wandering pugilist! —For five days—I kept going back! But the result was the same. So I thought! If he had no intention of fighting, I'd just have to give him a reason to fight! That's why I snatched some gold and silver treasures from his house and ran all the way here!"

...Hey now... My eyes turned into dots. I felt like I had just heard something outrageous.

"However, instead of coming out himself, he sent these thugs he hired with money after me!"

"...So that's how it is... is what you're saying..."

I muttered fearfully. I could feel my cheek twitching slightly.

"Exactly!"

For some reason, Lag nodded broadly in an incredibly cheerful tone.

"The thugs you just floored were the ones Gurka hired! So, that makes you a fine accomplice now!"

"Wait just a minuteeeee!?"

I shouted in spite of myself. The gazes of the other customers focused on us for a moment.

"—So, because of that, you have no choice but to help me out."

"How does the story end up there!? First off, even if you call me an accomplice, I just simply made a mistake...!"

"I wonder if the guys who got beaten feel the same way?"

"Ugh...!?"

He spoke with such a cool face that I was speechless for a moment. But I couldn't let myself be talked down so easily. I glared straight at Lag.

"—For instance, there's always the option of me flooring you and handing you over to the authorities."

"Heh heh heh. Naive, naive."

Lag kept his composed expression and wagged his finger back and forth.

"I've hidden the stolen goods in a certain place. If I were to say, 'She's my partner. She tried to keep the loot for herself and sold me out,' what do you think would happen?"

"...Ugh...!?"

I was speechless again at his words. ...This... I thought he was just a brawl-obsessed freak, but he's actually quite cunning...

"There's no proof you're a partner, but if it comes out that you and I were sitting here having a friendly meal together, wouldn't you end up in a cell until the goods are found?"

.....

Dammit! Was the offer of this meal itself a trap!? This guy... he's good...

"But on the flip side. If I hand over the stolen goods and say I tricked you into siding with me, you'll probably get off scot-free. —Now. Let's get back to the point; I want you to lend me a hand."

"...What do you want me to do...?"

Since it had come to this, there was nothing else for it. I asked reluctantly.

"Be my bodyguard."

"Bodyguard?"

I knit my brows at his words.

"Even if you don't hire a bodyguard, shouldn't you just fight yourself?"

"You idiot! Isn't it scary if the opponent has blades and stuff!?"

"Hey, hey! Who was the one who said they were aiming to be the strongest in the world!?"

"The people who swing swords around are aiming for something different, so it's fine!"

...He was a "world's strongest" with surprisingly little guts.

"Besides! My goal right now is to fight Gurka and win! But considering today, I don't think he'll come out right away! First, he might send thugs he hired, or pugilists he's raising, or maybe even sorcerers! There's no point if I'm worn out from dealing with those guys when he finally shows up. That's why I want to ask you to clear the path for me."

"...I see... fine..."

I let out a small sigh. Either way, it seemed I had no choice but to accept.

"Fine. However—I didn't hear anything about you stealing things from someone. I'll take it as a perfectly normal bodyguard job."

"That's fine with me."

"—And one more thing—"

"Hey, hey. There's more?"

"Not just for this time, but you'll be covering all meal and lodging expenses."

"Is that all? Fine by me."

He nodded easily. ...Heh. Hooked! —Thus, wearing a fearless smile, I set about conquering every item on the tavern's menu.

Just as Lag had said, pursuers began to appear from the very next day. Sometimes it was pugilists Gurka was training. Other times it was thugs brandishing weapons. But my spells floored every single one of them with ease. And toward the backs of the fleeing opponents, Lag would throw out his words. —You guys are no match for me. Tell Gurka to come out directly. And then, today, the fifth day since we met—

The person who came to the village where we were staying was a single man. He looked to be in his late thirties. He was a silver-haired middle-aged man with an absurdly sturdy build. Lag was on the taller side, but compared to him, this man was a full head taller.

"—Hoh... You finally came out yourself..."

Lag wore a fearless smile.

"—Which means, this guy is..."

"Yes. I am Gurka."

In response to my murmur, the man answered in a heavy tone. He glared at Lag.

"—Is it you... requesting a match with me, only to end up being a petty thief?"

"...Heh! Don't get the wrong idea! I just wanted to fight you! I haven't touched the goods. They're hidden in a certain place. Once the fight with you is over, I'll return them properly!"

At Lag's words, Gurka wore a cold sneer.

"...Hmph... saying that... I bet if you lose, you're planning to say, 'I won't return the stolen goods unless you accept a rematch,' right?"

"I won't say that! Not a chance!"

"Hoh. So you're telling me to believe the word of a thief?"

"...Ugh...!"

Lag was left speechless by that. ...Well, I suppose he brought that on himself. After a short silence, he spoke.

"—Fine. If you just promise to fight me, I'll tell you where the goods are first. How about that?"

"Hoh..."

Gurka stared silently into Lag's eyes for a while.

"—Very well. I will fight you."

"Really!?"

"Yes. I will fight and make you realize your own immaturity."

Saying that, he shifted his gaze to me.

"—I heard the one who finished off the men I sent was a female sorceress. Is it you?"

"I guess... though I'm just the type who got set up and forced into helping by Lag here."

"I see— Then I'll have you be the witness. —Come along."

Giving a one-sided command, Gurka turned his back on us and began walking briskly. Lag and I started walking after him.

"Aren't we fighting here?"

At my question, Gurka didn't even turn around.

"I have already retired. I do not care to fight in a place like this and become a spectacle for the rabble."

—Hoh... He continued walking in silence after that, and eventually, in a somewhat open spot within the forest away from the village, he stopped dead in his tracks.

"...I see... it's just about the size of a match venue."

Lag muttered, looking around.

"Now then. Well—"

"Did you forget the promise?"

Gurka asked in a quiet tone, as if killing Lag's momentum.

"—Oh. Heh. That's right. I'll tell you. Where the things I swiped from your house are. Near the town of Lyukney where you live, there are two huge oak trees growing side by side, right? They're buried right in the middle."

"I hope that's not a lie. Not at this stage."

"It's the truth. I swear it on these fists."

"...Hoh... In that case..."

Gurka's eyes flashed with a momentary, oily light.

"Then I no longer have any use for you. —Do it."

The moment he said that. *Hyun!* With the sound of cutting wind, countless arrows rained down from between the surrounding trees toward Lag and me! But—naive! At that moment, I activated the spell I had already finished chanting!

"Dill Brand!"

Buffeted by the powerful wind I created, every single incoming arrow was blown away in a completely different direction.

"...What...!?"

Lag and Gurka shouted in surprise at the same time. Gurka's surprise was at the trap being easily broken. And Lag's surprise was—

"You bastard! What's the meaning of this!"

He turned an angry gaze toward Gurka and questioned him.

"Ha! Don't bark! You're just a thief! Why should I have to cross hands with a petty thief like you!?"

"—That's not the only reason, is it?"

At my words, spoken in a quiet tone, Gurka's complexion changed slightly. At the same time, Lag lunged at Gurka!

"You bastard! How dare you!"

He dove into Gurka's personal space and threw a right fist. Fast! But by a hair's breadth, Gurka leaned his upper body back, dodged the strike, and launched a right kick in return. Lag stepped further inside, blocked it with his left arm, and aimed for the chin with that same left. However. Gurka's arms, which looked like they were losing balance, caught Lag's left arm!

Gogin!

A dull sound echoed. Lag pulled away from Gurka and leaped far back.

"Lag!? Your left hand!"

"Don't worry about it!"

He said without turning toward my voice.

"What are you talking about! Your arm is dangling!"

"It's acting to make the enemy lower his guard!"

How on earth do you act like that?

"Anyway, we're retreating for now! You can't have a proper fight with enemies all around you anyway, can you!?"

"—Fine!"

His decision was quick. He leaped far back and lined up beside me. I began chanting a spell again.

"Don't let them get away! What are you doing!?"

At Gurka's reprimand, after a moment's pause, arrows came flying again. But I was faster. The wind of the Dill Brand I cast again blew all the arrows away.

"Eii! Bows are useless! Go with swords, with swords!"

Hearing Gurka's voice at our backs, Lag and I ran into the forest.

"—Doesn't look like they're following us anymore..."

Lag stopped running before we had gone very far. Indeed, there was no sign or presence of pursuers behind us.

"...They give up surprisingly easily..."

"It's not that; they probably went to dispose of the evidence."

"Evidence?"

Lag knit his brows at my words.

"That's right. —Just think about it. Even though we were in that village all this time, why didn't a single official ever come? The ones who came were all Gurka's personal pugilists or thugs he hired. Why do you think Gurka didn't report it to the authorities?"

"Why... because he hated officials or something..."

"What if it wasn't that he didn't tell them, but that he couldn't? For instance—if there was something among the things you stole that would be bad if the authorities found it."

"No way!? He was a former champion, and now he's one of the town's prominent citizens! Are you saying a guy like that is doing something illegal!?"

"...There you go talking in your sleep again... If the world were a place where every strong or important person was a good human being, there wouldn't be wars and such, would there?"

"...Ugh...!? Well... that's true, but..."

"Even if it were just a tactic to find out where the goods were, then the ones waiting for us just now should have been officials, not Gurka's henchmen. But the ones actually waiting were the bunch Gurka paid. And while we're at it, they suddenly fired arrows without a word, trying to catch us in a treacherous ambush—"

In fact, if I hadn't noticed those things and chanted a spell in advance, both Lag and I would have been finished by that first attack.

"The goal is to silence you. The reason the pursuers stopped is probably because they realized it's faster to recover the goods than to silence us. Without the evidence, no matter what I or you say, nobody will believe us."

"...But... that's just a guess, right?"

"It's a guess. Ultimately. —But if this guess is right, once Gurka gets the goods, he won't hesitate to inform the authorities about us. If that's the case, there's only one thing for us to do! We have to get those items before they do and expose Gurka's misdeeds! If we can't do that, we'll be caught and sent to a cell, or we'll be wanted for the rest of our lives! If that happens, you won't be able to keep talking about being the strongest or whatever!"

"—In other words—I have no choice but to do it..."

"Exactly! So, was there anything among the things you stole that seemed like that?"

"Even if you say 'seemed like that'... stealing wasn't my goal... Anyway, I just swiped a few things from the warehouse that looked like they'd be expensive."

"I see— Well, whatever. Anyway, as long as we get the items before they do, it'll be fine. Let's get going—"

"—Wait a minute!"

As I tried to start walking again, Lag stopped me.

"...That thing about it looking like my arm got hit in the fight earlier... actually, it wasn't acting..."

"...I know..."

"You're a sorceress, right? Can you use a spell that heals broken bones or something?"

When asked, I thought about it. —True, I can use healing, but did that heal broken bones...? However, when you don't know, immediate human experimentation is the only way! That's what being a sorceress is all about! I gave a bright smile and said,

"—It's fine! Leave it to me!"

I spoke the baseless line with plenty of confidence and set about chanting the spell.

"—Here it is!"

Lag and I reached the spot just as the sun was nearing the western mountains. It was in a forest a short distance from the town of Lyukney. By the way, Lag's fracture had already been completely cured by my treatment. Man—you really should try everything.

"—I see. So it was a place like this."

The one who responded, however, was not me.

"Gurka!?"

At Lag's voice, Gurka and his entourage appeared from the shadows of the trees. He stared at Lag with a gaze full of hatred.

"...You've really done it... If one of my subordinates hadn't spotted you, I would have been completely deceived..."

"Deceived!? Heh! Don't say such nasty things! Unlike you, I'm honest!"

Lag bluffed shamelessly. As expected, Gurka's brows shot up.

"Don't make me laugh! You told me a false location!"

"I'm telling you it wasn't a lie!"

Lag pointed back and forth between the two exceptionally tall trees standing side by side.

"Between the two oak trees near Lyukney! Where else could it be!"

"....."

At his words, everyone's eyes turned into dots. I patted his shoulder a few times and pointed at the same trees he had indicated.

"Those are cedar trees."

"...Wait...?"

Now Lag's eyes turned into dots. ...I too had assumed Lag had told a lie... but it seemed he just couldn't tell the difference between types of trees. ...But... how do you mistake an oak for a cedar...?

"—Eii! Either way, it doesn't change the fact that it's a tree!"

Even as he spoke, his cheeks were a bit red, as if he hadn't quite finished bluffing his way out of it. From beside him, I spoke toward Gurka.

"—That's right. And besides, either way, it's a fact that the evidence of your stolen goods trade is buried here."

"...Wh-what...!?"

At those words, a look of genuine agitation appeared on Gurka's face. Ho-ho. It seemed I had hit the mark. I had just tried a bluff, figuring it'd be something like that if it was a crime where the items served as evidence.

"You brat! How much do you know!?"

"Who knows?"

I wore a meaningful smile. Lag pointed sharply at Gurka.

"In any case, this is the place where we settle things, right!?"

"—That is how it is—"

Gurka assumed a fighting stance toward Lag.

"—Lina-san, don't interfere... I'll be the one to finish him!"

"Fine."

I turned my gaze toward the entourage and began chanting a spell. Lag and Gurka stared each other down in silence for a moment—

I was the first to move.

"Flare Arrow!"

Dodogoooon!

"Nohyeaaaaaaa!?"

With one of my spells, Gurka let out a pathetic scream and was blown away.

"....."

With eyes like dots, Lag stared at me for a while.

"...Um... were you listening to what I said...?"

"Of course."

I puffed out my chest and said,

"However— I forgot to mention, I lie sometimes."

"....."

At my words, he remained frozen in his fighting pose for a long time.

—The entourage, having lost their boss, fled with surprising ease not long after that, once I fired off two or three spells—just enough to create craters—as a threat.

—The next day—

At an inn in the town of Lyukney. Lag was gulping down liquor in the tavern-slash-bar on the first floor, even though it was broad daylight. It didn't seem to be a case of drowning his sorrows over me interfering with his long-awaited match with Gurka. True, until this morning he had been grumbling about various things, but now, for some reason, he was grinning ear to ear. It seemed I didn't have to worry about him complaining. I sat down across from him and ordered a meal from the owner.

"—What's up? You're in a surprisingly good mood."

"Yeah! ...I resented you at first, but I've been thinking hard about it since then!"

He spoke with the meaningless cheerfulness unique to a drunkard.

"It's true you're the one who floored him! But if you think about it, the whole thing was my fault to begin with! Which means, it's the same as if I defeated him! In other words, I'm the man who buried the legendary pugilist! That makes me the strongest in the world!"

...Is that really okay...? Aiming for "world's strongest" with such low standards...? Well, on my end, it was better than being grumbled at endlessly. —Eventually, while I was busily eating the meal that had been brought to me—

"—Ah! There they are!"

Two officials appeared at the tavern's doorway. They came over to us.

"Lina-san and Lag-san, right? —That Gurka guy told us everything. It seems he really was trading stolen goods."

"Hoh..."

"A fair number of the pugilists he was training were connected to the town's thugs. It looks like he was selling the goods he bought through that route to rich people he's known since his active days."

I see. A common pattern.

"Be grateful! It's all thanks to me!"

Lag spoke and emptied the rest of his mug in one gulp.

"No, really. It is."

One of the officials shook Lag's hand while he let out a stupid laugh.

"It really is thanks to you."

The other official, also wearing a smile, took Lag's left arm.

"—But well, a thief is still a thief."

"...Eh...?"

At those words, his eyes turned into dots.

"I told you, didn't I? Gurka told us everything. Including how you got frustrated when he wouldn't accept your challenge and broke in as a thief."

"...No...! Wait a minute...!? That was strictly to get him to accept a match...!"

"—But still, a thief is a thief."

"Now, now. Let's hear the details somewhere else."

"Wait just a minuteeeee!?"

Leaving a long scream behind him, Lag was flanked by the officials and dragged out of the tavern. —It seemed his path to becoming the strongest was still a long way off...

(Path To The Strongest: End)

Afterword

Author: It’s finally here—Slayers Special Volume 8, *The Terrifying Future*! This book marks the end of the standalone stories originally serialized in *Dragon Magazine*!

L: Yeah, yeah... wait, what’s with this page count?! Don't tell me this is all just one giant afterword?! ...Well, if it is, I guess I'm happy since it means more screen time for me.

Author: Hmph! I’m glad you asked! The *Slayers Special* series has reached a milestone, and the main series has also finished its first arc (though the second arc has already started). So! Since the story is told from Lina’s first-person perspective, there are many "behind-the-scenes" settings that have never been revealed. This project is all about spilling those secrets all at once! Haha! Isn't it grand?!

L: I see. So it's not just a last-minute plan because you couldn't come up with any ideas for *Slayers EX*?

Author: *Thwack!* (Stabbed) ...Guh... huff... huff... N-no, that's definitely not it...

L: You're breathing pretty hard there, Author.

Author: A-anyway! Some of this might overlap with features in *Dragon Magazine*, the *Marugoto Slayers* interviews, or various doujinshi, but since many people follow *Slayers* only through the paperbacks, please bear with us.

L: But what about people who haven't read the main series or if this is their first *Slayers* book? Reading deep lore settings out of nowhere will just leave them confused.

Author: ...Hmm... true... It sounds like a sales pitch, but I’d really like those people to read the main series and the *Specials* first. It’ll definitely be more interesting that way than reading this first.

L: Talk about a blatant plug...

Author: Leave it alone.

L: Whatever. Now then! Let’s get straight to my detailed profile—

Author: We don't need that.

L: WHAAAAAT?!

Author: Wait! If you swing that pickaxe now, the rest of this segment won't happen! Are you okay with your screen time ending right here?!

L: ...Urgh...! (L puts the pickaxe away into thin air) ...F-fine... I'll play along and follow the schedule for now... In exchange, you better let me talk about the Monster Race (Mazoku) later!

Author: Fine, fine.

L: Okay... well then, let's keep things moving! First, let's talk about the "War of the Resurrection" from a thousand years ago...

Author: Whoa, hold on.

L: What?

Author: Don't "What?" me! You're jumping straight into main series lore? And starting with Monster Race trivia again? I know the main series has more mysteries, but this is technically a giant version of the *Special* afterword, so we should start with that.

L: ...Wait, were there any mysteries in the *Specials*?

Author: ...Well... if you put it like that... it's not so much "mysteries" as it is episodes about various characters that appeared...

L: Hmph. Fine, I guess. Let's finish that up quickly so we can get to the serious Monster talk.

Talking About the "Specials"

L: So, we're talking about the *Specials*... We can save Lina and her sister for later! When you think of *Slayers Special*, you think of that person—Lina's rival, the woman who makes crying children laugh: Naga the White Serpent!

Author: Whoa! You're actually hosting properly!

L: When it comes to Naga, her weird outfit is her trademark... why does she wear such strange clothes?

Author: Because it's a memento from her mother.

L: .....

Author: It’s an outfit left behind by her late mother. And Naga herself happens to have that kind of fashion sense. Given that, why on earth would she refuse to wear it?!

L: ...Well... I guess everyone has their own tastes... but... what kind of person was Naga’s mother?

Author: Ha! Even more amazing is Old Man Diol from *The Terror of Chimera* and *Naga’s Adventure*! Despite being a man of that age, he ordered ten sets of those clothes! If "Hero" is a title for the truly brave, he certainly lives up to the name!

L: ...I don't want a hero like that...

Author: ...Yeah, me neither...

L: But speaking of Old Man Diol, what happened to those ten Naga Clones he made?

Author: They were abandoned.

L: ...Hey...

Author: Well, there are theories that they were sold off, or they just disappeared when he wasn't looking so he left them alone... but as the author, I prefer the "Stray Naga" theory.

L: Stray Naga?

Author: Yeah! Lina, not knowing how to deal with them, stuffs the Naga Clones one by one into tangerine cardboard boxes in various villages and towns...

L: ...Does that world even have cardboard boxes?

Author: It’s for the atmosphere! Anyway, she closes the lid and writes "My name is Naga. Please take care of me," and leaves them on the side of the road.

L: .....

Author: Then a kid walks by, thinks "What's this?", opens the lid, and finds a Naga Clone curled up inside. The moment their eyes meet, she goes, "Hohohohoho!"

L: ...That is genuinely terrifying. The kid would be scarred for life...

Author: ...Yeah... now that I'm picturing it, it might be incredibly creepy... Oh! What if this scene gets an illustration in the book?!

L: ...Ugh... imagine an innocent reader finding this in a bookstore, thinking, "Oh, a new *Slayers* book!", flipping through the pictures, and coming across an illustration of Naga in a tangerine box laughing "Hohoho!"

Author: ...This might turn into a horror book...

L: ...Let’s stop thinking about it...

Author: ...Good idea...

L: Speaking of Naga multiplying, there was also Shadow from *The Shadowy Threat*. That character was actually quite popular—some people even asked for her to reappear in *Slayers Excellent*.

Author: True. I enjoyed writing her... but thinking about it rationally, she’s a very difficult character to bring back.

L: Right... if she’s the opposite of Lina and Naga, she’s a sweet, honest, kind girl. A typical "Good Girl Heroine."

Author: Exactly. If you build a story around that, it just becomes a very ordinary tale... Shadow only works because of the contrast with the original; she's best as a one-hit wonder.

L: I see. So those Shadows are living peaceful lives somewhere quietly.

Author: Precisely.

Guest Characters and Backstories

L: ...I feel like you won't answer questions about main characters to avoid spoilers, and if I ask about guest characters, you'll just say "they're doing the same thing" or "I don't know."

Author: Well, I can't tell you "what happens to Lina next," but I’ll answer within the range I can.

L: Okay then, how about some memorable characters? Phil... is royalty, so I can guess his situation... What about Remy? She was quite popular. I bet the answer is "she's cutting something somewhere" or "she got arrested for cutting someone."

Author: Actually, as of the end of Volume 8 of the main series, Remy is probably wandering around looking for her big brother.

L: Big brother? She had one?

Author: Yep!

L: Is he a blade fanatic too?

Author: More like a "manslaughter fanatic."

L: ...What kind of siblings are they?

Author: They promised to hone their sword skills and meet once a year to test their strength against each other. But "Brother didn't show up this year," so she's looking for him.

L: ...That sounds like an incredibly bleak family relationship... Does that mean the brother might show up in the future?

Author: Actually, he already did.

L: Huh? Who?

Author: Rodimus from the main series, *The Magician of Atlas*.

L: ...I see... he definitely likes cutting people... So, do characters from the *Specials* or *Excellent* often link back to the main series?

Author: Sometimes. For example, Zector from *Little Princess 2*. The group that turned him into a beastman was that suspicious religious cult from the main series volume *The Silver Magical Beast*.

L: Ohh. Speaking of *Little Princess 2*, that ending felt a bit abrupt...

Author: Oh, that. Lina knew ordinary spells wouldn't work on Zector, so she finished it quickly with one big move... but writing that would have ruined the atmosphere and felt too blunt, so I left it out.

L: ...Well, ending it with "Dragon Slave! Boom! The end" would be pretty blunt.

Author: In a similar vein, I intentionally didn't write the showdown between Xellos and Mazenda in Volume 4, *The Silver Magical Beast*.

L: ...And we've jumped straight into main series talk. I bet you ran out of *Special* trivia...

Author: ...! ...Well... from here on, the main series and *Special* lore start to intertwine... If someone hasn't read the main series and plans to, they might want to stop reading now.

L: You mean you have to spoil some things to explain the settings?

Author: Exactly. The reason Mazenda was defeated by Xellos off-screen was that I didn't want to reveal Xellos was a Monster (Mazoku) at that point. If I had written a fight scene...

L: Yeah, it'd be obvious he's a Monster. Pulling cones out of space and all. Well, whatever, let's dive into the main series lore!

The Unwritten Stories

Author: ...With the main series, there are a lot of parts I just can't write.

L: Because of the first-person perspective, right? There are many things just glossed over. Like in *The Phantoms of Slayers*, it mentions Gourry and Sylvie being involved in an incident in Slayers in the past, or in *The Silver Magical Beast*, it hints at a history between Zelgadis, Xellos, and that cult. Are you planning to write side stories about those?

Author: I don't really have plans for side stories...

L: Why not?

Author: Regarding the old incident in Slayers—I haven't thought about what happened at all.

L: ...Hey...

Author: As for the other one involving Zel and Xellos, I actually have a rough plot in mind...

L: Oh? Like what?

Author: Well...

- Zelgadis is traveling to find a way to return to human form. He rescues a girl (named Plum in the draft) being threatened by some humans.
- He asks for details, but Plum won't answer. She leaves after saying thanks.
- In her village, a mysterious monster is eating the villagers one by one. To stop it, the village has hired mercenaries, sorcerers, and a mysterious priest (yes, it's Xellos). Zel gets involved.
- The mercenaries and sorcerers are killed one by one by the monster.
- Meanwhile, a mysterious group (the cult of Krotze) appears around Plum. It turns out Plum's young brother is in their hands.
- Zel encounters the monster and chases it, but is blocked by an assassin hired by Krotze—Zuma. Zuma corners Zel, but the fight is interrupted.
- Zel discovers the monster eating people is actually Plum's brother, turned into a half-demon by Krotze. Facing him, Zel sees himself in the boy and can't attack. Xellos, however, kills the boy without hesitation. Zel condemns him; Xellos ignores him.

- Zel realizes Plum is a descendant of priests from a kingdom destroyed by forbidden research into immortality, and she possesses a manuscript of the *Claire Bible*.
- However, Plum is captured by Krotze. Zel and Xellos head to rescue her.
- They face the cult's army and Zuma. Xellos tells Zel to go ahead while he faces Zuma alone.
- At the hideout, Plum is forced to reveal the location of the manuscript to save the villagers.
- Amidst the corpses of the cult's assassins, Zuma and Xellos face off. Xellos asks, "What will you do?" Zuma replies, "If I am told to kill, I kill... that is an assassin's way. However, I cannot win against you." Zuma vanishes. Xellos smiles to himself: "There are some who at least know their place."
- When Zel reaches the hideout, Plum is lying there, dead. Xellos arrives: "I still have things to ask her," and resurrects her. "How?!" Zel asks. Xellos smiles: "It's a secret."
- They fight in the cave where the manuscript was hidden, but it's already gone. Xellos vanishes to chase it. Zel fights a final battle with a remaining assassin.
- Plum watches quietly as Zel sets off to find the manuscript.

Author: And that's the story!

L: Oooooh! But if you have it figured out that far, why not just write the side story?

Author: There are two reasons I can't!

L: Oh? Which are?

Author: First! The atmosphere isn't "*Slayers*"!

L: ...Well, based on that summary, it's dead serious with no gags.

Author: Exactly! Mercenaries dying one by one has more of a horror vibe.

L: ...But since it's a side story, a different atmosphere might be okay. You said yourself in an afterword that Arc 2 would have a different feel than Arc 1.

Author: It's not just the atmosphere. That leads to Reason Number Two!

L: ...Which is?

Author: As you can see from the plot, this story was designed specifically to set up *Chaos in the Capital* and *The Silver Magical Beast*. If I had written this first, then in *Chaos*, the assassin Zuma—who even gave Zelgadis a hard time—would be targeting

Lina! It would create great tension. Questions like "What happened to Zel?" or "What was in the manuscript?" would keep the readers hooked.

L: ...And then the next book is *The Silver Magical Beast*...

Author: Exactly. At the start, Lina loses her magic and Xellos appears with his overwhelming power and ruthless side. The readers would know who he is, but Lina would unknowingly try to strike a deal with him. Then Zelgadis appears as expected. Then the manuscript content—as hinted by the title—is revealed to be the method for creating magical beasts. That was the intended flow.

L: ...I see. But if you write it now, everyone already knows Xellos is a Monster, and Zanaffar and Zuma have already been dealt with...

Author: Yeah, it'd feel a bit "too little, too late." That's why I can't—or rather, won't—write it.

The Monster Race (Mazoku) Explored

Author: On the other hand, because of the first-person perspective, there are things I wanted to write but couldn't.

L: Monsters? *Excited* Monster talk?

Author: ...Well, I couldn't write about what Chaos Dragon Gaav or Hellmaster Phibrizzo were doing behind the scenes in each volume. You seemed like you wanted to explain the Monsters... do you want to handle that part?

L: Hmph! (Puffs out chest) I don't follow the movements of such lowly underlings!

Author: ...Hey...

L: Besides, I might follow the Phibrizzo faction, but the Gaav faction...

Author: Fine, fine... I'll explain. But first, I have to explain the chain of command...

L: Oh, leave that to me. First, at the top of the Monsters in that world—and a mere errand boy to me—is the sad middle manager, Ruby Eye Shabranigdu...

Author: ...Calling him that is a bit pitiful. He is the Demon King of that world, after all...

L: It's fine. Anyway, Shabranigdu has subordinates known as the "Five Dark Lords": Hellmaster Phibrizzo, Greater Beast Grausherra, Chaos Dragon Gaav, Beast Master Zelas-Metallium, and Deep Sea Dolphin. But because the boss (Shabranigdu) has such

bad leadership, Chaos Dragon Gaav had already betrayed them by the time the *Slayers* story began.

Author: We'll talk more about that later.

L: Below each of them are "Generals" and "Priests"—basically the executives. The chain of command is solid down to that level. But once you get lower, like Seigram, Gi Gaía, Zorum, or Vizea, they start doing whatever they want. And by the time you get to Brass Demons or Lesser Demons, the organization is so messy it's barely worth categorizing.

Author: That's why they can be summoned by human sorcerers and happily follow orders.

L: Exactly! *Guh!* Don't you guys have any pride as Monsters?! I didn't raise you to be like this! It's so pathetic I want to call a talk show and complain!

Author: Don't!

L: By the way, a simple guide to a Monster's power is "how closely they can mimic a human." In that world, a human form is quite versatile, so being able to maintain that form is a display of will and power. For example, Gaav and Xellos stay in human form even when damaged, while Kanzhel stops being human after a certain amount of damage. Other Monsters who can't take a perfect human form are lower ranked.

Author: So Vizea, who only had half a human face, was just focusing on one spot. The higher the Monster, the more "beautiful" they look.

Author: Is... is that how it works?

L: Look at me! I'm the perfect example!

Author: .....

L: ...What's with the meaningful silence? Think about it. Since I can change my form freely, I can look exactly like what the observer prefers. In that sense, I am the perfect beauty.

Author: (Whispering) More like Rodem or a Slime...

L: .....! (She heard him)

Author: Ah... no... anyway... In *Slayers!*, Rezo-Shabranigdu looked like a total monster...

L: Th-that's because! He could have taken Rezo's form, but at that time, Rezo's own will and soul weren't completely gone. To weaken that interference, he chose a monstrous form. Monsters don't have a "true appearance" to begin with.

Author: ...That makes sense. Well, keeping that loose chain of command and power balance in mind, here's what the Monsters were doing during the volumes:

During *Slayers!* and *The Magician of Atlas*:

- Because Lina defeated Shabranigdu, the "North Demon King" (who was originally one being) learned of a human who could use the spells of the Lord of Nightmares.
- The Gaav faction had already begun infiltrating the Kingdom of Dils to prepare for the conquest of the Kataart Mountains.

During *The Phantoms of Slayers*:

- Shortly after this episode, Hellmaster Phibrizzo formulated a plan to destroy the world using Lina. He ordered all Monsters not to attack Lina Inverse. To test Lina and smoke out the Gaav faction, he intentionally leaked this information to Gaav's side.
- Seigram, who was a low-level subordinate of the Beast Master, went rogue and ignored Phibrizzo's orders because of his grudge against Lina.
- The Gaav faction sent Kanzhel to bring Seirune City under their control. Hearing the leaked info, they planned to assassinate Lina.

During *Chaos in the Capital*:

- Lina happened to wander in and ruined part of Gaav's plan, so Phibrizzo began moving his plan into high gear.
- The rogue Seigram was picked up by the Gaav faction.

During *The Silver Magical Beast*:

- After the episode, Phibrizzo forcibly requested Xellos's cooperation, using Seigram's betrayal as an excuse. (As I'll mention later, Phibrizzo's own Priest and General were already gone). No wonder Xellos hates him.
- Seigram merged with Zuma.

During *The Darkness in Vezendi*:

- The Dragon Priest Rashart was sent to kill Lina, but he couldn't move openly because of Xellos. For the record, in this story, Duclis and Gaduza seem to be working for Seigram, but they were actually just doing the legwork for Seigram on Rashart's orders.

Then—*Chaos Dragon's Challenge* and *The King of the City of the Dead*:

- Everything converges here.

L: Ohh.

Author: "Ohh"? You sound like it's someone else's problem...

L: Well, everyone was working so hard on their little schemes! Good job, good job. Keep up the good work on the road to destruction.

Author: ...Remind me, who was it that ultimately ruined Phibrizzo's plan with a blunder?

L: ...! ...Th-that's... right! It's all Phibrizzo's fault for not studying enough! Honestly, what happens if you accidentally attack *me*?! If he'd read the afterwords, he would have known!

Author: ...I don't think Phibrizzo reads the afterwords...

The War of the Resurrection

L: Now that our Monster talk is in full bloom! Let's go back a thousand years before the time of *Slayers*! Time to explain the legendary "War of the Resurrection"—famous for looking like a cozy word when typed on a word processor!

Author: ...Is that what it's famous for? Do you know much about that event?

L: Of course!

Author: I see. Did you nag Ruby Eye until he told you the details, and then nitpick all his mistakes?

L: Yes.

Author: ..... Stop doing that. It's pitiful, even for him...

L: —The War of the Resurrection— It's called the final battle between the revived Demon King and the Water Dragon King, but it was originally a war started by Hellmaster Phibrizzo.

Author: Oh, she’s doing a dramatic monologue with faraway eyes.

L: During that war, Ruby Eye Shabranigdu finally revived. But only one-seventh of him. In a direct fight, there’s no way he could beat the Water Dragon King, who is one-fourth of the Flare Dragon. So, they placed four of the Five Dark Lords—Grausherra, Phibrizzo, Dolphin, and Zelas—in the four cardinal directions surrounding the Holy Mountain Kataart where the Water Dragon King resided.

Author: Basically a Monster barrier to weaken the Water Dragon King.

L: Exactly. But even then, they were a bit uneasy. So Shabranigdu himself took Chaos Dragon Gaav and headed for the Water Dragon King. Gaav was a Dragon, and the Water Dragon King was a Dragon. By using that common "Dragon" attribute, Shabranigdu struck the Water Dragon King through Gaav and defeated him.

Author: ...Ah, so to put it in an analogy, it's like using soapy water to mix oil into water.

L: Correct! Nice follow-up! Well, up to that point, Ruby Eye did a good job for an underling... but obviously, doing that wouldn't leave Gaav unscathed. He wasn't destroyed, but he lost the power to manifest in the physical world. Basically, he "died." Usually, he would have revived eventually, but...

Author: The Water Dragon King messed with Gaav in his final moments.

L: Yes. He used that "Dragon" attribute against him. He forced Gaav to reincarnate into a human, causing him to lose his purity as a Monster. As a result, he ended up the way he did. To put it simply, he got treated as a "noble sacrifice" by his boss and got beaten up alongside the Water Dragon King, so he turned delinquent. ...The nuance is a bit different, though.

Author: I think it’s very different...

L: And the boss himself got stuck at Kataart. Also, at that time, Phibrizzo’s own Priest and General were used as pawns and were completely destroyed.

Author: Since it came up, let me explain the difference between "dying" and being "destroyed" in that world. "Dying" means losing the ability to physically interfere—in plain terms, you can't do anything.

L: Pure Monsters are originally spiritual beings, but they manifest in that world through sheer willpower. When they "die," their will breaks and they retreat to the spiritual world for a rest. But over time, if they get their motivation back, they can revive. ...Oh, obviously, for humans and normal creatures, if they die, they might reincarnate, but they almost never revive in the same form.

Author: On the other hand, being "destroyed" means your knowledge, personality, and abilities are broken apart or vanished into darkness. Once this happens, even a God or a Monster cannot revive in their original form. The Flare Dragon and the Water Dragon King didn't take enough damage to be completely annihilated, so part of the Flare Dragon's power and consciousness sleeps inside a certain "Big Sister back home," and the Water Dragon King's knowledge, which was cast into another dimension, is called the *Claire Bible*.

The "Big Sister Back Home" and Gourry's Origins

L: ...Big Sister back home...

Author: Yes. Big Sister.

L: ...You... you finally mentioned her...

Author: Well, she's an essential character when talking about the origins of *Slayers*.

L: I believe she was the protagonist of a sci-fi novel you were thinking about back in high school. Her name was—Luna.

Author: Yep! I like looking at the moon, so I named her that... but then names like Luna became popular for princesses fighting phantoms, beast warriors, or black cats with crescent moons on their foreheads, so I missed the chance to mention it. In that story, there was a brain-enhanced clone of Luna, a ten-year-old twisted genius mechanic girl. That was Lina.

L: ...Hmm... a clone of "Luna" named "Lina"... It's simple, but incredibly lazy...

Author: And the enemies were a super-civilization known as "Creators." One of the high-ranking officers who was Luna's direct enemy was a beautiful man—brilliant, cold, and ruthless. His name was Gourry Gabriel.

L: ...Huh?

Author: Yes. It was Gabriel with an "L," but he is definitely the prototype for Gourry Gabriev in *Slayers*.

L: ...So he was smart originally... (Deep sigh) Where did it all go wrong for him to end up like he is now...?

Author: ...Well... in the first *Slayers!*, I made him "ignorant of magic" to make it easier to explain magic concepts... but then I realized that after Volume 1, he became "ignorant of memory." Oh well, that's life. It's Gourry, so it's fine.

L: ...Gourry might be more pitiful than Ruby Eye...

Author: Because of that background, the Big Sister back home has become a sort of "super character" in *Slayers*.

L: So, what are the chances of Big Sister appearing in *Slayers* in the future?

Author: Almost zero. I intended her mention to be like Columbo's "my wife." More importantly, she's so powerful it would ruin the balance of the story. She's strong enough to laugh while beating down someone like Rashart.

L: ...She's not human... already... So Luna Inverse will never see the light of day?

Author: I don't know about that. I just won't put her in *Slayers* because it ruins the power balance with Lina. I've vaguely thought that it might be interesting to pair her with Xellos in a side story someday.

L: Ohh. ...But is it okay? Someone like that working as a waitress in the countryside...

Author: Well, the countryside is mostly peaceful.

L: ...I don't think that's the point... There's the sister and the parents—three of them, right? In Lina's hometown of Zephilia.

Author: As of the end of Volume 8, they have one pet.

L: A pet?

Author: Dilgear.

L: *Pfft!*

Author: Luna has a hobby of feeding stray dogs and cats... Dilgear, who was easily defeated and had nowhere to go in *The Phantoms of Slayers* (he survived after all), wandered and ended up in Zephilia. He collapsed from hunger and was picked up by the Big Sister. Now, he's chained to a huge doghouse in the backyard of Lina's family home, and Luna named him "Spot."

L: ...Dil... Dilgear is...

Author: He protests with tears: "Sister, my name isn't 'Spot,' it's 'Dilgear'...", but Luna doesn't listen at all. She places a steaming steak dinner just out of reach of his chain and says "Spot, Spot!", until Dilgear cries and says, "...Spot is fine..."

L: ...The Knight of the Flare Dragon is crueler than a Monster... Usually, anyone would run away...

Author: Unfortunately, beyond being his savior, Dilgear is in love with Luna in a way. By the way—though I don't think I'll write it in a novel—there’s an episode where Lina returns home after a long time, sees Dilgear, and laughs her head off.

L: Aaah! Another tragic character!

The Birth of "Slayers!"

Author: Well, the original sci-fi Luna had a slightly different personality.

L: She had the potential, though?

Author: Exactly. I haven't published a single line about Luna... but with that background, I saw the first issue of *Dragon Magazine* and the call for the first Fantasia Long Novel Award, and thought, "Alright! I'll apply!"

L: It was almost an impulsive decision.

Author: Yep! I started writing in a college notebook as a draft... but it wasn't *Slayers!*. I had a rough outline, but I got stuck halfway through.

L: But thinking about it now, that story is amazing.

Author: Yeah. Prototypes of various *Slayers* characters kept popping up, though the names were different. It was a Monster-hunting story set in the modern or near-future with a human protagonist...

L: Rezo, Zorum, and Zelgadis appeared as Monsters, the Sacred Tree was there, the boss monster from Volume 9 appeared... and even *I* was in it. Under the name "L," I was pretending to be human and running a magic item shop. Almost like a certain doctor in a demon city.

Author: Right, right.

L: ...Wait! That means if you had finished that story, I would have had way more screen time!

Author: (Gulp!) ...W-well, that's assuming it would have won. The atmosphere was completely different from *Slayers*, so if I had submitted that, it might have been rejected and never seen the light of day. When you think about it like that...

L: ...H-mm... well... I guess that's better than never seeing the light of day at all...

Author: Right? So, I got stuck on that story... and panicked: "Ugh! I won't make the deadline! No time to think through a plot! Fine! I'll just write as I go!" That's how I started *Slayers!*.

L: You just winged it? Completely?

Author: Completely. I thought, "If I'm winging it, I have to use an easy format! Okay! First-person girl narrator! The lead... okay! Let's bring in the sister (?), Lina, from that high school story! But a ten-year-old traveling alone is unrealistic, so let's make her fifteen! No mechanics in a sword-and-sorcery world, so she's a magic geek!" I decided all that in about thirty minutes.

L: It really is an "instant" story...

Author: Yep! When I got stuck, I'd pull characters or episodes from that failed story. When Lina and the others were fishing, I didn't even plan to include Rezo or the Demon King!

L: So when did you decide to bring them in?

Author: ...Uh... I don't remember exactly, but I think it was when I was writing the start of Rodimus's night attack...

L: ...Hey... that really is incredibly haphazard...

Author: I was working at an office then, and while pedaling my bike to and from work, I'd think, "Hmm, what should I do next... Oh well. It's an RPG-style fantasy, so let's throw in a Demon King." No joke, I decided it at that speed.

L: ...You're really underestimating fantasy, aren't you...?

Author: ...Actually... I think so too. That's why I'm very hesitant to call *Slayers* a fantasy novel. I write it as entertainment fiction, not fantasy.

L: So a lot of ideas came to you while pedaling your bike?

Author: Yep! I came up with the Giga Slave incantation while pedaling down a dark road at night, muttering "Darkness beyond blackest pitch..."

L: ...I wouldn't want to be friends with someone like that...

Author: Leave me alone! ...Anyway, I sent in *Slayers!*, but the original ending was much more of a "deus ex machina." I thought "It'll probably fail anyway," and started writing a draft for the second award when...

L: You got the notice saying "You won"?

Author: Exactly. At that point, I never thought it would become a series or get this big, which is why Lina was casually throwing Fireballs at Zorum, a pure Monster.

L: I see. By the way, what happened to that draft for the second award?

Author: Oh, that was a revamped version of the sci-fi story I failed at before. Since I wrote it assuming *Slayers!* had failed, the ideas overlapped too much. As a result, it's impossible to publish. But well, *Slayers* ended up being well-received, so...

L: I see. Like they say in French, "Resultat okay." (All's well that ends well)

Author: ...Why French?

Magic and the World Setting

L: But wait, I just realized—this is less "The Secret Origins of Slayers" and more just "An Old Guy's Reminiscing."

Author: Who are you calling an old guy?! ...Well... based on my age... mumble mumble... Anyway, back to the topic! What were we talking about?

L: Big Sister. And Monsters before that.

Author: Oh, right. I wanted to explain magic.

L: True. It's fine to just read it as "some mysterious, amazing power," but when you try to understand the system, there are definitely some gaps. A common question is "Why don't Monsters use Dragon Slave when they have more magic than Lina?" and "There's Black Magic borrowed from Monsters, but why is there no magic borrowed from Gods?"

Author: Regarding why Monsters don't use Dragon Slave—Phibrizzo mentioned this in Volume 8—borrowing power from another Monster is like denying your own power and existence. Even if the source is a higher-ranked Monster, it's the same. Xellos used Shamanistic magic while pretending to be human, but that still caused him some damage. Using Black Magic borrowed from another Monster would jeopardize a spiritual being's very existence.

L: It's like a salaryman being assigned a job, and then saying, "Actually, I can't do this. Sir, please help me out," and then getting fired or demoted after the job is done.

Author: ...Hmm... that's... somewhat accurate, I guess.

L: By the way, Brass Demons and Lesser Demons use Fire Arrows, but while human sorcerers borrow spirit power to create them, lower demons create Fire Arrows with their own power.

Author: Magic borrowed from Gods... cannot be used in the region where *Slayers* takes place. Of the four Dragons left behind by the Flare Dragon, the Fire Dragon King, Sky Dragon King, and Earth Dragon King are still alive, and it should be possible to borrow their power, but...

L: That's where the "God-Sealing Barrier" comes in. During the War of the Resurrection, four of Shabranigdu's generals cast it to weaken the Water Dragon King. While he was alive, it weakened him; now that he's gone, it blocks the power of the other Dragon Kings from outside.

Author: The setting of *Slayers* is about the size of Europe, but it's isolated by sea and desert. Usually, they aren't impassable, but with the Hellmaster's barrier in the desert and the Sea, Beast, and Greater Beast barriers in the three seas, the natural threats plus the Monsters' miasma made travel impossible—I mean, *used to* make it impossible.

L: Oh, right. Because Phibrizzo vanished in *The King of the City of the Dead*...

Author: ...Acting like it's someone else's problem again...

L: ...Ugh...!? A-anyway, since Phibrizzo is gone, part of the barrier is broken. Does that mean people can use God-borrowed magic or cross the desert now?

Author: Yeah. Though it'll take years for the people living there to realize it, cross the desert, or develop and practicalize God-borrowed spells. So, the "White Magic" Lina and the others use isn't actually borrowed from Gods.

L: ...Then what is it?

Author: Simply put, people in that region just call magic that has a "holy" image—like healing or purification—"White Magic." It's actually Shamanistic magic.

The Sorcerers' Association and Zanaffar

L: Speaking of which, the Sorcerers' Association pops up in many stories, but it's hard to understand. It seems like every branch does its own thing.

Author: Yep. Every branch does its own thing.

L: ...Really...

Author: Well, it's a dangerous region where Monsters roam. Many people want to learn magic for self-defense. If individuals just took apprentices and did the whole "this is your trial" bit, they'd never keep up with demand. So, the Sorcerers' Association was

established. But if they just taught Fireball to anyone who asked, there'd be too many people using it for evil. So, they only teach theory and concepts.

L: Like a school. They teach knowledge, but what you do with it is up to the individual.

Author: Exactly. The basic system is like a school: they take tuition fees, give lectures, and provide access to magic books. Lina, because of her complex toward her sister, begged her parents to let her attend...

L: And she turned out like that.

Author: ...I guess... Other income for the Association comes from acting as an agent for traveling sorcerers and taking a cut of the commission... I mean, taking an agent fee. They also teach simple, harmless spells like "Light" to ordinary citizens for a fee. Or they secretly sell the "holy" magic know-how they developed, like purification spells, to temple officials.

L: Hey now.

Author: "Secretly" doesn't mean it's a shady deal, it just means they don't tell the general public. They also offer a paid messaging service using *Vision* spells, or recommend sorcerers to lords and kings who want a court magician. —Always with the condition that they won't be used for military or illegal acts. The resident sorcerers run these operations, and the funds go toward research.

L: ...So it's a multi-business university chain?

Author: Exactly. But the problem is, there's no "Head Office." There used to be... in Seirune...

L: ...And it was destroyed by the magical beast Zanaffar.

Author: Yep. Squashed. Since then, there's been no central control, so while the basic policy remains the same, the details vary wildly from place to place. That's about it.

L: I see. By the way, Xellos's description of Zanaffar was ambiguous—he called it annoying but not that big of a deal. How effective is it against Monsters, really?

Author: Hmm... it probably wouldn't work against a Monster with the power of someone like Kanzhel.

L: ...Wait, does that mean... it's weak?

Author: Against Pure Monsters, yes. But against demi-monsters like Brass Demons or Lesser Demons, it has almost absolute power. If there was a total war between humans and Monsters—Pure Monsters are overwhelmingly strong, but their numbers are very

small. The bulk of the Monster army would be Brass and Lesser Demons. If humans deployed a mass-produced Zanaffar then...

L: I see. Even if the Monsters didn't lose in the end, it wouldn't be an easy fight.

Author: In fact, if all Monsters moved at once, they could wipe out all humans in the *Slayers* region... no, wait. There are unreasonable ones like the Big Sister back home. Anyway, they could definitely drive them to near-extinction. But if they did that and got exhausted, the three Dragon Kings left by the Flare Dragon would make short work of them.

L: True. And since Monsters feed on fear and hatred, until they achieve their goal of erasing the world, it's best to keep humans "neither dead nor alive" so they can torment them.

Author: ...I don't think I should agree with you when you say it so casually...

The Future of Slayers

L: Hmm... so in this world, Lina and the others are in a pinch, but the Monsters are in a pinch too! *Guh!* This is all Ruby Eye's fault! I'm going to punch him later.

Author: ...Maybe the reason the Demon King is weakened is because you're always bullying him.

L: ...! ...A-anyone who gives up over something like that isn't a Monster!

Author: ...Actually, I think most things would be destroyed if you poked them. Like Phibrizzo.

L: Phibrizzo was... just physically weak!

Author: What kind of Hellmaster is that?!

L: But really, Demon Kings in other worlds are doing their best. The One Who Spreads Darkness... is doing a bit too much and going out of control, but the King of the Blue Sky and White Mist are fighting on equal terms in their respective worlds...

Author: ...Even if you name them, ordinary readers won't remember. They're the Demon Kings who lend their power to Lina's Demon Blood Talismans.

L: *Gasp!* How cold! Everyone! Don't you call yourselves Monster fans?!

Author: I don't think there are many Monster fans... even in popularity polls, they get a flood of negative votes.

L: *Urgh!* Fine! Then it's time for an image change! From now on, all Monsters will spread destruction in a more soft and gentlemanly manner!

Author: What am I supposed to do with that command...

L: *Guh!* The future of Monsters is dark! Well, there's a theory it was dark from the start. I wonder what will happen to the Monsters of this world? ...Oh wait, questions about the future are off-limits, right?

Author: Yeah, I can't spoil the future here. If I wrote "so-and-so dies in the main series," it would ruin the experience for people reading it later. —That's just an example, though.

L: Then I'll ask something harmless. Zelgadis and Amelia were popular in Arc 1—do you have plans for them to appear in Arc 2?

Author: Hmm... to be honest, I don't have plans right now... but when I was writing Volume 2, *The Magician of Atlas*, I didn't have any plans to bring back Zelgadis, and I didn't plan to bring back Lantz in *The Phantoms of Slayers* either. And yet...

L: They showed up anyway.

Author: Yep.

L: In short, you're just winging it and don't know what will happen.

Author: I... I object to "winging it"!

L: Since Zelgadis's name came up, I'll ask—does Zel have plans to return to human form?

Author: Ha! That's a secret. I have various ideas, but it's a fact he hasn't returned to human form by the end of Arc 1. Let's just say there's a possibility.

L: Look at you acting all high and mighty. You just haven't thought about it, have you?

Author: No, I have, but it's better to leave some room for the readers' imagination, and considering the possibility of Zel joining the main story later...

L: *Gasp!* That's a very planned answer for you! My, you've grown.

Author: ...Hey now...

L: Let's see, what else... (She looks into space for a while, then coughs slightly, pretending to be casual) Oh yes, about me...

Author: You have no more screen time. None. Except for afterwords. (Firmly)

L: .....

Author: Oh, right! I have to say this or it'll be a lie. The origin of the series title: "*Slayers*"! "Slayer" literally means a killer. (By the way, I looked up "slay" in a slang dictionary and it said "to make an audience laugh," but whatever). In fantasy or RPGs, you often see names like "Dragon Slayer" for swords. ...When I first applied for the Fantasia Award, it was "Slayer" because they "slay" Monsters. But since there were multiple people, I made it "*Slayers!*". I just chose it randomly after finishing the story. But I recently came up with a forced reason for the title, and since I can't write it in a novel, I'll announce it officially here:

After all the episodes of *Slayers* are over, Lina's fame grows even more, and sorcerers of the next generation call her by this epithet: "The One Who Destroys the Evil (Mazoku)" Lina Inverse—*The Slayer*.

—Well, we've rambled through trivia, settings, and behind-the-scenes talk for a long time. We've run out of topics and pages.

L: ...I see... so it's over...

Author: Oh? You're awfully quiet at the end... ...Wait, *gasp*?! What are you doing?! Why do you have that pickaxe?!

L: Heh. Heh. Heh. You can guess, can't you? You sure said a lot of things, didn't you? You're prepared for the consequences, aren't you? O-f c-o-u-r-s-e?

Author: W-wait! Weren't you going to push the "soft and gentlemanly" Monster image change?!

L: Who could possibly do something like a foreign press secretary?! Monsters have to be like Monsters! Besides! Even if it's a giant version, a *Slayers* afterword needs *this*!

Author: W... WAITTTTTTTTTTTT?!

Thud.

L: —And there we have it! Now that it's nice and quiet! Thank you for sticking with us through this super-giant afterword, "Slayers Behind-the-Scenes Talk." We'll wrap it up here.

(L bows politely. A *Clap!* sounds from the wooden clappers—Curtain.)

(Afterword: End)